

The Five Constant Contemplations

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 24:33

Namo tassa bhagavato hara-hatto samma-sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato hara-hatto samma-sambuddhassa Namō tassa bhagavato hara-hatto samma-sambuddhassa — Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

So this is our November moon, a little earlier than November but even so it's a November moon. There are 13 this year. I've pre-recorded this because I'm on retreat this year and I'm very grateful to Mark that he's going to run it through for us.

If you remember last November, this lugubrious month, I devoted it to our favourite party topic: death. And we saw how powerful that contemplation was, according to the Buddha, leading directly to liberation. I'm going to say something about how that works in terms of contemplation. But this is only one of a set of five. And we find a discourse in the Numerical Sayings in section five, number 57, which talks about the Five Constant or Regular Contemplations.

So the first thing he enumerates, the five contemplations: "There are these five themes that should often be reflected upon by a woman or a man, by a householder or one gone forth." One gone forth is a monastic. What five? "I am subject to aging, not exempt from aging. I'm subject to illness, not exempt from illness. I'm subject to death, not exempt from death. I must be parted and separated from everyone and everything dear and agreeable to me. I am the owner of my *kamma*, my actions of body, speech and mind." That's the *kamma* here, not the consequence. "The heir to my *kamma*, I have *kamma* as my origin, *kamma* as my relative, *kamma* as my resort. I will be heir to whatever *kamma* actions I do, good or bad."

Now we're going to leave *kamma* till next November because there's too much here. But even so, you can still contemplate that.

Then he tells us how we should reflect upon this. They should often reflect, "I'm subject to illness. I'm not exempt from illness." In a state of health, beings are intoxicated with their health. And when they're intoxicated with their health, they engage in misconduct of body, speech, and mind. So in other words, when we feel okay, we tend to push the body. Just think about our eating habits and the difference between living to eat and eating to live.

"I'm subject to aging. I'm not exempt from aging." In their youth, beings are intoxicated with their youth. And when they are intoxicated with their youth, they engage in misconduct of body, speech and mind. Now, of course, it's not only the youth who are intoxicated with youth. This is a very youth culture. So everybody is intoxicated with youth — you know, Botox. Old people are useless, a weight on society. And

of course, 60 is the new 40. So it's really getting beyond that and accepting our age as it comes towards us.

"I'm subject to death. I'm not exempt from death." During their lives, beings are intoxicated with life. And when they're intoxicated with life, they engage in misconduct by body, speech and mind. So of course what we try to do is live to create as many great experiences we can. We want to suck as much joy out of life as we can, squeeze the stone for more excitement. So, of course, this leads to unfortunate behaviour. And we only got to think about now a societal denial of death.

"I must be parted from everyone and everything dear and agreeable to me." Beings have desire and craving in regard to these people and things that are dear and agreeable. And excited by this craving, they engage in misconduct of body, speech and mind.

So one little exercise that I suggest you might do is to create two lists: one list of all the things you would not want to lose, want to be robbed of, and the other list of all the people that you wouldn't want to lose or who you wouldn't want them to go away or disappear. And then just go through and just catch your relationship to those things.

Remember that when it comes to things, we can't actually own them. I mean, that's a legal fiction. What we can do is use them. So if somebody steals my mobile phone, I go around moping and moaning about this dreadful thief who has taken my phone. It's no longer my phone, is it? It belongs to the thief. So I instead have to wish that he uses that phone to good purpose and that if he sells it on, that money be used for the benefit of himself and other people. So that's the way we ought to look at it. People are different, of course, and that's a different area we don't want to go into this evening.

And then of course there's the reflection on *kamma*: "I am the owner of my actions, heir to my *kamma*. I have *kamma* as my origin, *kamma* as my relative, *kamma* as my resort. I will be heir to whatever *kamma*, good or bad, that I do." People engage in misconduct by body, speech and mind because we're not always conscious of the effects of what we might be doing. But as I say, we shall leave that for more detail next November.

And this is how he wants us to reflect. "I am not the only one who is subject to illness, not exempt from illness. All beings that come and go, that pass away and undergo rebirth, are subject to illness, not exempt from illness." Now that sort of contemplation I find personally rather comforting. You know, it's just to know that you're not on your own, that this is the big picture. Everybody falls ill sometime or other.

And it's the same with aging. "I'm not the only one subject to aging, not exempt from aging. All beings that come and go, that pass away and undergo rebirth, are subject to aging. None are exempt from aging." And that's all beings. That's even our little pet rats who run over our property. And again, it's a strange comfort.

It's the same with death. "I'm not the only one who's subject to death, not exempt from death. All beings that come and go, that pass away, undergo rebirth, are subject to death. None are exempt from death." So I

don't know, there's a comfort in looking back and seeing your mother and father, if they have died, of the generations before — your grandfathers and grandmothers, your uncles and aunts and all that. And if they can go, then of course I can go. That's not a problem. So it's a case of, I don't know, feeling somewhat comfort that you're just part of that process.

I mean, I remember I saw a cartoon once where there's an elderly lady on her deathbed, surrounded by her friends. And she's asking, "Why me? Why not one of you?" And of course, just consider if we were the only ones to die. You know, everybody else is alive. Everybody else is mucking about and having a great time. And just me, I've got to die. Well, it wouldn't be fair, would it?

"I am not the only one who has to be parted and separated from everyone and everything dear and pleasing to me. All beings that come and go, pass away and undergo rebirth, must be parted and separated from everyone and everything dear and pleasing." So this of course is renunciation. This is of course being able to let go and to bring ourselves back to the reality of our relationships with things and, of course, more touchingly with people. It's really about accepting the way it is.

And then finally, "I'm not the only one who is owner of one's *kamma*, heir to one's *kamma*, who has *kamma* as one's origin, *kamma* as one's relative, *kamma* as one's resort, who will be heir to whatever *kamma*, good or bad, that one does. All beings that come and go, that pass away and undergo rebirth, are owners of their *kamma*, heirs of their *kamma*, have *kamma* as their origin and also their resort."

Now, what he says is this: as they often reflect on this theme, the path is generated. They pursue the path, develop it and cultivate it. And as they do so, the fetters are entirely abandoned and the underlying tendencies are uprooted.

So what he's saying is that by practising these sorts of practices, we are undermining all our delusion. And when it comes to the fetters, these are wrong view of self, sceptical doubt, clinging to mere rules and rituals as if they're enough to become liberated. And that's what you gain when you enter the stream, the first level of attainment. But sensual craving and ill will don't go until the third attainment. And then finally in the fourth attainment, the *arahat*, the fully liberated — craving or really wanting these beautiful *jhānic* states, both the lower four and the upper four; conceit, this business of "I am better, I am worse, I'm equal to"; restlessness, which really includes all the defilements that we've had before, but now are just so fine that they are experienced as restless; and finally, the whole of ignorance, delusion disappears, upon which all our suffering was grounded.

The *anusaya*, these underlying tendencies, they are these subconscious, unwholesome habits. So we know this from our Freudian psychology, that there is underneath us all this unresolved stuff. And given the right impetus, given the right circumstance, it'll pop up. And hence we have embarrassing Freudian slips.

Let me just, first of all, read his verse. Now, I've written this out in just straight sentences, because then it's much more directly understandable than when I read a verse, which is somebody else's translation, trying

to keep the verse of the Buddha.

So this is what he said, or this is what he said to himself at some point in his training: "It terrifies ordinary people to contemplate sickness, aging and death, and that they are inescapable. If I find myself detesting such people, it would not be proper for me, for I have the same flaws. Contemplating this, while knowing that there's no acquisitiveness in *Nibbāna* — you can't take anything with you to *Nibbāna* — I overcame these obsessions with health, youth and even life. I saw safety in renunciation, so I put effort into the practice and realised *Nibbāna*. It is no longer possible for me to indulge in sensual pleasures. Now I have fulfilled the spiritual path. I shall not come back again."

So now contemplation, how does it work? So first of all, it's not thinking. We use thought, but it's really to get in touch with our feelings. And when you get in touch with your feelings, let's say about death, which is an easy one — an easy one to start with because it's so heavy — you find a phrase which touches you. And what I mean by touch is that it frightens you a bit or you feel you don't want to go there. The more you don't want to repeat that phrase, the more you have to repeat it. And you just keep repeating it into the heart until you feel there's a becoming, a sort of acceptance of it.

And when it's fully digested, when the reality of what you're saying is fully digested and there's no more aversion, and there's no more fear of whatever you're saying, then you'll find that there comes this sense of relief. This is the way it is. And with it, you might find yourself even smiling. And that's what we have to do. We have to find phrases which move us, phrases which push us a little to accept things.

Now, it might be memories. It might be something we've remembered. Perhaps we remember seeing a friend's corpse or a parent's corpse, anything which would bring up for us our fear of death. And the same is true for falling sick. Everybody has a particular illness, I think, that they're afraid of. Everybody is, to some extent, hypochondriac — either some terrible paralysing disease, or you pick up a tick or something when you're walking out in the fields and you're afraid of the illnesses and parasites you can get from those things. And there's, of course, dementia. That's a background fear, I think, to anybody who approaches my age anyway. Anyone over 70, you know, you begin to forget things. You think, "Oh, that must be the first sign."

So you have to allow these things to come up into your mind and you're using the word, you're using the memory, but really what you're doing is you're getting in contact with your heart's feeling about it. And so you just keep repeating it gently, staying with the heart's reaction, wait for that resistance to disappear and then it's digested. Now that's not the end of it. You'll find another sentence which brings up much the same thing, but over time we're getting used to the idea that we may fall sick, we will definitely be growing old — even if you're very young, you're still growing old — and we will die.

And we will be separated from everything that is dear and agreeable to us. And we are owners of our *kamma*. Whatever we've done in the past will manifest.

So what I've done here is I've put up some phrases, some stuff on the screen. So I'm going to share screen with you now. And what we're going to do is go through them and then I'm going to leave the main page up there for maybe two, maybe three minutes. And if you carry on with that contemplation into our normal meditation time and then if you wish you can always go back to the breath, that's not a problem. But at least here we can start.

So here we see some of the five regular ones. I've just been talking about this — how to repeat it and get it into our hearts.

So sickness is a mini death, the preparation for death. The body manifests its vulnerability. There is discomfort, pain, and there's also some disability. And this undermines our obsession with health and beauty.

So you might find a phrase that repeats something like: "Sickness is unpreventable. I will probably fall sick. This body is of a nature to fall ill. This body has not gone beyond sickness."

Then there's aging, which is, you might say, a progressive dying. And this contemplation undermines our intoxication with youth, trying to stay young forever. Abandon that. "Aging is inevitable. This body is subject to aging. This body has not gone beyond aging. This body is now in a process of aging."

So one of these sentences, or find your own sentence, find your own way of touching your fear and aversion about aging.

Death, of course, is certain. Life is uncertain. That's straight from the Buddha. Sometimes saying the obvious gets through the thick shell of not wanting to know. "Life is uncertain. Death is certain. Death is inescapable. Everyone must die. The remainder of our lifespan is decreasing continually." So this is what I say — you know, every time we have breakfast, to remind ourselves: this is one less breakfast in this lifetime. When we've had a superb lunch somewhere, this is one less superb lunch in this lifetime. When we've had an amazing meal with friends out in the restaurants and all that, this is one less amazing meal with friends I shall have in a restaurant.

"Death will come regardless of whether or not I've made time for practice." Now that's a killer. You've got to really meditate on that — that, you know, it's no good as you're dying saying, "Oh, if only, if only I had." We don't know when we're going to die. Human life expectancy is uncertain. There are many causes of death. The human body is very fragile. Only the practice of Dharma can help us at the time of death. Our wealth cannot help us. Our loved ones cannot help us. Our own body cannot help us. Death is inescapable. This body is subject to death. This body has not gone beyond death. This body will die.

And then there's the second one: "I must be parted and separated from everyone and everything dear and agreeable to me." Well that's something again we can make these two lists in our own time. But you can't take anything with you. That's the problem.

And then contemplation of *kamma*: "I own my actions. I inherit the results of my actions. I'm born of my actions. I form relations through my actions. I live dependent on my actions. And whatever I do, for good or for ill, I will inherit the results." Actions here is actions of body, speech mainly, but of course it all begins in the mind.

So I'm just going to put these on the screen.

There they are. Let me make it a bit bigger. One second. There we go. I can just roll that up a bit. Can you all see that? Come on, that's it. Right, so there are your contemplations.

What I'm going to do is leave this for two minutes, and I will now hope that this little homily will have been of some use to you, that I've not caused confusion, and that you will, by your severe practice of these five contemplations, arrive at the goal we're all striving for sooner rather than later.

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