

Ageing

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 18:47

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

What I've chosen is a chapter called "On Ageing," but actually there are very few verses in the chapter. The title of a chapter in the Dhammapada really doesn't tell you what's in it. It usually has one or two verses to do with the title. So I found about three or four of them. We're going to do three of them. I shall change my normal way. I'm going to chant and then translate, and then give the story three times that way, even though they're very similar.

The first one: *Etha passathimam kāyam cittaṃ roga-nilaṃ pabhaṅguramuhuccitam yassa natthi dhuvam ṭhānam.*

Gil Fronsdorf translates that as, "Look at this beautiful mind-made body." I don't see where he gets the "beautiful" from. Maybe he's translating this *bimba*, which I don't know whether it's connected, but the Italian word for baby is *bimbo*. It just means shape, the shape of the body. So it's like this elusive or delusive idea that we have of the body. We don't see it as it really is, but actually it's a mass of sores, propped up, full of illness, and of course we use it for our many plans. But there's nothing stable or lasting about it. It's impermanent and unstable.

The story that goes with that is about a courtesan named Sirimā. She was a devotee of the Buddha, offering alms food to the monks and all that. She was known as very generous, but she was also very beautiful. One young monk heard about this, and he fell in love with her, even without seeing her. Very strange. The next day he joined the monks who went to her house, but Sirimā was sick. But she still paid respects to the monks, and after seeing her, this young monk desired her even more.

That night poor Sirimā died. Sad story. The Buddha wanted to teach this young monk a lesson. So he asked the king to keep the corpse for a few days. Then on the fourth day, he took the dead body out to the charnel grounds. Of course, it was no longer beautiful. It was bloated, stinky and full of worms. The Buddha told the young monk if he wanted to see Sirimā, then he would be able to go and see her. When he got to see her, of course, it was a terrible shock when he saw in fact it was a corpse. He must have had some inkling of that because the Buddha would have told him where to find her, which was at the charnel grounds.

The Buddha asked the king to announce that anybody who paid a thousand coins—she was a courtesan, so

a very royal prostitute we can say, or a high-up prostitute—to pay a thousand coins for a night with her, but of course nobody wanted to. Even when it was free, nobody wanted to spend a night with a corpse. The Buddha told the monks about this, and he then talked about non-attachment to the body. This young monk, as always in these stories, seeing the true nature of the body, his love for Sirimā completely disappeared. I never know how to really connect these stories, but anyway, they tell us something about the time.

The second one: *Parijñānam idaṃ rūpaṃ roga-ñilaṃ pabhaṅguraṃ bhijjati pūti-kāyo maraṇantañ hi jīvitaṃ.*

That translates as: "This body is worn out, so fragile and a nesting ground for disease. When life ends in death, this putrid body dissolves." It's not centering on old age, but at least it tells us about the unreliability of the body.

The story that goes with that is about Uttarā, who was a very old nun. She was 120 years old. She was very generous and respectful. Many times she shared her alms food with the monks just out of her kindness. Once while going on alms rounds, she met the Buddha. Reverentially, she stepped out of his way and paid her homage. While she was doing that, she accidentally stepped on her robe and fell over. The Buddha consoled her and told her to understand the condition of her body. She was very old and her body was frail. She should practice diligently to perfect her mind. Uttarā reflected on the Buddha's words and attained the first path and fruit. That was the second verse.

The third one: *Jīranti ve rāja-rathā sucittā atho sarīram pi jaraṃ upeti dhammo ca puññānaṃ na jaraṃ upeti santo have sabbhi pavedayanti.*

This translates as: "Even the splendid chariots of royalty wear out, so does the body grow old. But the Dhamma of the virtuous doesn't decay, or it is upheld when the virtuous teach it to good people." The other translation is "the good ones teach it to each other." Here the Buddha is contrasting how even things begin to wear out, never mind the body, but the Dhamma doesn't.

There's a very strange story that goes with this. Queen Mallikā was the wife of King Pasenadi, who was the king of Kosala, north of the Ganges. Once she went to the bathroom to wash herself, and her dog entered with her. While she bent over to wash her feet, the dog started to misbehave with her, and the queen did not stop it. Leave that to your imagination.

When she came out, the king told her he saw everything through the window. What was he doing looking through the window? Anyway, he scolded her for her behavior, but Mallikā denied doing anything and suggested that the bathroom was enchanted—whoever went inside would be seen doing strange things through the window. She sent the king inside. When he came out she told him she saw him misbehaving with a goat. The king, not being very smart, accepted this as an explanation, but the queen felt very bad about lying to the king for many years.

When she was dying, this moment kept coming back to her consciousness over and over again. Because our dying thoughts determine our next birth, she was born in a state of suffering, in a hell state. The king wanted to ask the Buddha where she'd been reborn, but the Buddha was not willing to tell him—he didn't want to hurt his feelings. Only after seven days in a state of suffering, the queen was born in the Tusita heaven as a result of her great meritorious deeds. Only then did the Buddha reply to the king's question, and the king was happy to hear this, but at the same time felt sad for her death. The Buddha replied with this verse saying that everything is subject to old age and death and therefore he should practice the Dhamma diligently.

I had written down some thoughts about death, which might lead to your own contemplation. Presuming now a healthy old age—healthy or not—mobility lessens, strength weakens, everything diminishes. Parts don't work so well, and some parts die before others. Life is strewn with "ooh" and "ahh." Acceptance, that's the way. This is what it is. That's an old meme now, isn't it? "This is what it is."

But the big thing is to abandon all lingering youthful plans. Old age offers time to reflect, to write one's life story, if only for oneself. Slowing down leads to restfulness in the present moment, watching the world go by. These days that might not be so pleasant. But it's a time to heal old wounds, apologies withheld, now offered, to remember all that was given, heartfelt gratitude expressed. And I think most of all, learning to wait—waiting to leave, to move on, to disappear, to go, comfortable with death.

I only had these thoughts once I reached 75. Until I reached 74, I had ideas of becoming a prime minister, ruler of the world, great footballer, great lover. It all disappeared, all in one birthday.

I was just thinking about life, and various people have separated our lives into certain allotments, you might say. I think I read somewhere Aristotle thought in terms of 25 years—25, 50, 75. That sort of works. Twelve years also can work in terms of splitting your life up, but the one that Shakespeare uses—I shall read his poem at the end—is of course seven years, which I think came into fashion during the medieval ages.

The first seven years: the first three are incredibly important, it seems, but at seven, you shed that lovely, delightful childlike mind and get real, a bit more real anyway, a bit more rational. Father Christmas can't come down the chimney. But worst of all, we become aware of guilt. We start feeling guilty about doing naughty things. Of course, this is the story of Adam and Eve. They ate the fruit of the tree of good and evil. I mean, it's so obvious. I don't know how people can come to believe it was actually real, that there was a place called Eden. It just boggles me anyway. So that's the first seven. That's a real change within us, actually. You might say that is actually part of the process of awakening. If you're always at the age of three, there'd be no hope, would there? I think chimpanzees get to about the age of three. I read that somewhere.

Then, of course, 14. Well, that's a real change, isn't it? Sex, drugs and rock and roll. A whole different type of relationship. When we get to 21, we normally feel quite mature. We're normally either in some sort of

skilled job or we're still gathering skills. We feel we're ready to move out into the world as fully grown adults.

By 28, it's all getting serious, I think. Some people start thinking about pensions and marriage and all that sort of stuff. You're getting a bit more real. But by 35, of course, you're normally well-established, if you've been lucky enough. Don't know about these days. But that officially is middle age, but you never think of that because you're still on top of the world. That hits you around about 40, 42. That's when the upward swing of life, the growing up, begins to level out, and we know we're growing down. We say growing old, but what goes up must come down.

By 49, 50, you know, you're not going to get that many more promotions or things aren't going to happen too much. These days you probably get fired. By 56, you're becoming aware that retirement is just over the hill there, looming ahead of you, retirement and all the thoughts that come around that. Some people, of course, take early retirement, but it's usually in the 60s. Then you're entering into a different way of life really. You try and make sense of it, got to keep busy, join all sorts of civic activities and reading clubs and anything to make life worthwhile.

By the time you're 70, you're well established if it's gone well. You normally feel okay, life's going your way, you might say, as long as you're healthy and all that. But when you reach 75, that's a bit of a doomsday birthday because you're looking at 80 and basically you're on countdown. You know most people disappear before 85, and that's a bit of an awakening call, isn't it? If you reach grand old age, well, it just carries on, but basically somewhere in your 80s, I think the mind has to become accustomed to the idea of dying.

It's one way of reflecting on our lives. I can end here now with this lovely poem by Shakespeare. Everybody knows it.

"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women are merely players. They have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages. At first the infant, mewling and puking in the nurse's arms. And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel and shining morning face, creeping like snail unwillingly to school. And then the lover, sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier, full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard, jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel, seeking the bubble reputation even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice, in fair round belly with good capon lined, with eyes severe and beard of formal cut, full of wise saws and modern instances; and so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts into the lean and slippered pantaloone, with spectacles on nose and pouch on side, his youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide for his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice, turning again toward childish treble, pipes and whistles in his sound. Last scene of all, that ends this strange eventful history, is second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."

Dear me. With that lovely little poem I shall bring my little homily to an end. I trust it has been of some

use, and I can only hope that by our contemplation of life and death we shall be liberated from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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