

Words Leading to Disenchantment

by Soma Thera

"Truly it will be not long before this body lies in the earth, bereft of consciousness, like a useless piece of wood, which is thrown away."

Usually, uninstructed worldly minded people do not think of death and do not like any pointed reference made to it by others. Such unreflecting, uninstructed people often shut their minds deliberately to the fact that death is waiting for them. They reject the possibility of a future life, and occupying themselves only with things of this life immerse themselves in the ephemeral joys of the five strands of sense desire.

To make such people think seriously on what is perhaps the most decisive event of life they have to reckon with — an event that will determine their future lives in no uncertain way — the Blessed One said, "Every householder and every one who has gone forth, should constantly reflect, 'I am subject to death.'"

The uninstructed worldly-minded man sees others dying around him but through intoxication with the pride of life he acts as if he were immortal. He sees the victims of disease around him, but due to intoxication with the pride of health, he acts as if he were immune from disease.

Enjoying the first flush of life's springtime, he sees many an old man in the last stages of decrepitude but owing to his pride of youth, through becoming intoxicated with it, he acts as if he may never grow old. And he sees many people losing their wealth and becoming paupers suddenly, but through his being intoxicated with the pride of power or position, he does not pity them, does not

sympathize with them, and does not think that he too might be overtaken by similar misfortune.

Thus intoxicated by these, and many other intoxicants, he behaves like a man beside himself, heedless of right and wrong, heedless of this world and the world beyond, enjoying fleeting pleasures, like a crab in a cooking pot before the water heats up. Even in his dreams he does not suspect that evil might befall him, but when he actually does, he loses control of himself, weeps, and bewails his lot.

Reflection on death if rightly practiced by a man opens his eyes to the individual essence of every form of being, its true nature, and removes the poison of pride, which makes him heedless of his welfare.

He sees them according to the words of the Buddha, "Uncertain is life, certain is death; it is necessary that I should die; at the close of my life there is death. Life is indeed unsure but death is sure, death is sure."

He who thinks often of death becomes ardent in the fulfillment of his duties. Therefore it is said, "The bhikkhu who is given to the practice of contemplating death becomes diligent." Visnucarman says, "In the wise man who thinks again and again of death, the terrible penalty, all activity, becomes lax like leather bindings soaked with rain."1

Thus, in those who seek immortality, all kinds of endeavor, exertion, to acquire worldly power and possessions become slack, through the perception of death, but they do all that has to be done for attaining the deathless state.

In the teaching of the Buddha the contemplation on death is intended to turn the mind away from the accumulation of mundane power and treasure and to increase the energy of the aspirant for highest freedom. Even at the moment of death, one has to do one's duty well.

Reflection on death quickens the mind and makes it develop unremitting ardor for the extinction of ill. Such reflection can never make one negligent of actions leading to freedom from craving.

Who thinks often of death thinks thus: "Now is the time to endeavor to realize the goal. Who knows that Death will not come till tomorrow? What covenant have I with Death and his hosts to keep them at bay?"

Those who frequently entertain the thought of death become convinced of the impermanence of all formations and the futility of emotion in the face of death.

Here it is good to remember how our Buddha acted as a *bodhisatta* and as a Buddha when death assailed him as well as those near and dear to him.

In his *bodhisatta* days, long before he became the Enlightened one, (Jataka III, 164-168) he developed the mindfulness on death and urged the members of his household too to develop it. And when his son died suddenly bitten by a snake while he was working in the field he did not wail or lament. He thought that the destructible had been destroyed, and Death had claimed what was his, and reflecting thus he went on working. Then seeing a neighbor passing he sent a message to his wife, which she understood, and she and the rest of the household came to the field and all of them together made a pyre just in that field and burned what was the remains of one who was dear to all of them without any one of them shedding a single tear.

When the Buddha was told of the passing away of the venerable Sariputta Thera, who was considered the Commander of the Army of Righteousness, the Blessed One said this to the venerable Ananda Thera, who was upset, "Tell me Ananda, did Sariputta take the aggregate of virtue along with him and become extinct? Or did he take the aggregate of concentration along with him and become

extinct? Or did he take along with him the aggregate of wisdom and become extinct? Or did he take along with him the aggregate of freedom and become extinct? Or did he take along with him the aggregate of knowledge and insight of freedom and become extinct?" — "No venerable sir." — "Have I not indeed told you before that with all that is dear, pleasing, involved are change, separation, and variation?"

The Buddha shows that it is not possible to stop the breaking-up of what is born, produced and put together, and what has the nature of breaking, and compares the venerable Sariputta Thera to one of the greater branches of the mighty tree of the community of bhikkhus. Comparable to the breaking of a bigger branch of a mighty tree, says the Buddha, is the venerable Sariputta Thera's passing away and no one can stop the breaking of what is breakable by ordering that thing not to break.

The Blessed One taught many persons such as Kisagotami the nature of death and led them through the gateway of the perception of death to immortality, by making them follow the path of virtue, concentration, and wisdom (*sila, samadhi, pañña*), in due order. That is to say, by making them first establish themselves in virtue, and with virtue as the powerful condition making them bring about concentration, and then with concentration as the powerful condition making them bring in to being wisdom. The Buddha himself and every one of his disciples, passed through the seven purifications, and the four stages of sanctitude to the ending of ill.

What is death? It is the vanishing, the passing away, the dissolution, the disappearance, the dying commonly called death, the action of time, the break up of the aggregates, the laying down of the body of a being. Or it is what takes place when vitality, action-produced heat, and consciousness leave the body, and the body is fit to be abandoned as useless for work, activity. "This body," says the

Buddha, "is abandoned when life, warmth, and consciousness, leave it; and this body which is bereft of sense, becomes the food of others."

Once when the Blessed One was staying at Ayodhya on the Ganges he spoke thus:

"Bhikkhus, if in any manner, this river Ganges were to bring a great ball of foam, and an intelligent man were to see it, reflect on it, and thoroughly examine it, then, to that man who sees, reflects on and thoroughly examines it, worthless would that ball of foam appear, empty and without essence. Indeed, bhikkhus, how can there be essence in a ball of foam? In the same way, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu sees, reflects on and thoroughly examines form of any kind, past, future, or present, internal or external, coarse or fine, low or high, far or near. To the bhikkhu who sees, reflects on and thoroughly examines it, worthless would form appear, empty and without essence. Indeed, bhikkhus how can there be essence in form?"

"If, in any manner, bhikkhus, when, in the heavy rain of autumn a bubble rises in water and passes away, and an intelligent man were to see it, reflect on it, and thoroughly examine it, then, to that man who sees, reflects on, and thoroughly examines it, worthless would that bubble appear, empty and without essence. Indeed, bhikkhus, how can there be essence in a bubble? In the same way, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu, sees, reflects on, and thoroughly examines feeling of any kind, past, future, or present, internal or external, coarse or fine, low or high, far or near. To the bhikkhu who sees, reflects on, and thoroughly examines it, worthless would feeling appear, empty and without essence. Indeed, bhikkhus, how can there be essence in feeling?"

"If, in any manner, bhikkhus, when a mirage quivers, at midday, in the last month of the hot season, and an intelligent man were to see

it, reflect on it, and thoroughly examine it, then, to that man who sees, reflects on, and examines it, worthless would that mirage appear, empty and without essence. Indeed, bhikkhus, how can there be essence in a mirage? In the same way, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu sees, reflects on, and thoroughly examines perception of any kind, past, future, or present, internal or external, coarse or fine, low or high, far or near. To the bhikkhu who sees, reflects on, and thoroughly examines it, worthless would perception appear, empty, and without essence. Indeed, bhikkhus, how can there be essence in perception?

"If, in any manner, bhikkhus, a man who moves about having need of heartwood, in search of, looking for it, were to enter with a sharp axe, a forest, see a giant young banana tree grown faultlessly, cut it at the root, cut off its top, and strip the rind from the stalk, he by stripping the rind from the stalk, should not come even to sapwood; how to heartwood? Were an intelligent man to see it, reflect on it, and thoroughly examine it, then, to that man who sees, reflects on, and thoroughly examines it, worthless would that banana stalk appear, empty and without essence. Indeed, bhikkhus, how can there be essence in a banana stalk? In the same way, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu sees, reflects on, and thoroughly examines formations of any kind, past, future, or present, internal or external, coarse or fine, low or high, far or near. To the bhikkhu who sees, reflects on, and thoroughly examines those, worthless would formations appear, empty and without essence. Indeed, bhikkhus, how can there be essence in formations?

"If, in any manner, bhikkhus, an illusionist or his apprentice were to produce an illusion, at a junction of four great roads and an intelligent man were to see it, reflect on it, and thoroughly examine it, then, to that man who sees, reflects on, and thoroughly examines it, worthless would that illusion appear, empty and without essence. Indeed, bhikkhus, how can these be essence in an illusion? In the

same way, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu sees, reflects on and thoroughly examines consciousness of any kind, past, future, or present, internal or external, coarse or fine, low or high, far or near. To the bhikkhu who sees, reflects on, and thoroughly examines it, worthless would consciousness appear, empty and without essence. Indeed, bhikkhus, how can there be essence in consciousness?

"The instructed noble disciple who sees thus, turns away from form, and also from feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. Turning away he detaches himself. With detachment he becomes free. When freed he knows, 'I am freed,' and understands, 'Birth has been exhausted, the excellent life has been lived, what ought to be done has been done, and there will be nothing more to come of this.'"

Further, the Buddha said that one whose turban is on fire should be one who aspires to the deathless act. There is no excuse for delay in working for deliverance from ill; Death is trying to take us always.

On a certain occasion the Blessed One went to a certain house set apart for sick bhikkhus and, having sat down on a seat prepared for him, said this: "Mindfully and with complete awareness should a bhikkhu meet his end. This is the advice I give you."

Again and again, the seeds of corn are sown; Again and again, the deities send down rain; Again and again, the farmers plow the fields; Again and again, the country is enriched. Again and again, the almsmen beg for alms; Again and again, the kindly givers give; And giving repeatedly, the givers make; Again and again, for happy worlds above. Again and again, the milk is drawn from cows; Again and again, the calf goes to its dam; Again and again, a being tires and quakes; Again and again, the fool goes to the womb. Again and again, comes birth and death to you; Again and again, men bear you to the grave. But he who sees clearly, having known the path; Which

leads not to birth, does not rise again.

Reference:

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