

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 04-05-2016.

Last week I shared some teachings on death contemplation, which is one of the practice exercises found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. I had not intended to return to the subject this week, but things changed. During the past week several sangha members have shared news of loved ones dealing with illness and the threat of death.

What I'd like to do tonight is to read portions of a sutta that feels like a valuable and timely teaching. We sometimes chant a portion of this. It's found in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, (*The Numerical Discourses*) Book 5, Sutta 57¹

“Bhikkhus, there are these five themes that should often be reflected upon by a woman or a man, by a householder or one gone forth. What five? (1) A woman or a man, a householder or one gone forth, should often reflect thus: ‘I am subject to old age; I am not exempt from old age.’ (2) ... ‘I am subject to illness; I am not exempt from illness.’ (3) ... ‘I am subject to death; I am not exempt from death.’ (4) ... ‘I must be parted and separated from everyone and everything dear and agreeable to me.’ (5) ‘I am the owner of my kamma [actions], the heir of my kamma; I have kamma as my origin, kamma as my relative, kamma as my resort; I will be the heir of whatever kamma, good or bad, that I do.’

“For the sake of what benefit should a woman or a man, a householder or one gone forth, often reflect thus: ‘I am subject to old age; I am not exempt from old age’? In their youth beings are intoxicated with their youth, and when they are intoxicated with their youth they engage in misconduct by body, speech, and mind. But when one often reflects upon this theme, the intoxication with youth is either completely abandoned or diminished. ...

“And for the sake of what benefit should a woman or a man, a householder or one gone forth, often reflect thus: ‘I am subject to illness; I am not exempt from illness’? In a state of health beings are intoxicated with their health, and when they are intoxicated with their health they engage in misconduct by body, speech, and mind. But when one often reflects upon this theme, the intoxication with health is either completely abandoned or diminished. ...

“And for the sake of what benefit should a woman or a man, a householder or one gone forth, often reflect thus: ‘I am subject to death; I am not exempt from death’? During their lives beings are intoxicated with life, and when they are intoxicated with life they engage

in misconduct by body, speech, and mind. But when one often reflects upon this theme, the intoxication with life is either completely abandoned or diminished....

“And for the sake of what benefit should a woman or a man, a householder or one gone forth, often reflect thus: ‘I must be parted and separated from everyone and everything dear and agreeable to me’? Beings have desire and lust in regard to those people and things that are dear and agreeable, and excited by this lust, they engage in misconduct by body, speech, and mind. But when one often reflects upon this theme, the desire and lust in regard to everyone and everything dear and agreeable is either completely abandoned or diminished....

“And for the sake of what benefit should a woman or a man, a householder or one gone forth, often reflect thus: ‘I am the owner of my kamma [actions], the heir of my kamma; I have kamma as my origin, kamma as my relative, kamma as my resort; I will be the heir of whatever kamma, good or bad, that I do’? People engage in misconduct by body, speech, and mind. But when one often reflects upon this theme, such misconduct is either completely abandoned or diminished. ...

“This noble disciple reflects thus: ‘I am not the only one who is subject to old age, not exempt from old age. All beings that come and go, that pass away and undergo rebirth, are subject to old age; none are exempt from old age.’

“This noble disciple reflects thus: ‘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; none are exempt from illness.’ ...

“This noble disciple reflects thus: ‘I am not the only one who is subject to death, not exempt from death. All beings that come and go, that pass away and undergo rebirth, are subject to death; none are exempt from death.’ ...

“This noble disciple reflects thus: ‘I am not the only one who must be parted and separated from everyone and everything dear and agreeable. All beings that come and go, that pass away and undergo rebirth, must be parted and separated from everyone and everything dear and agreeable.’ ...

“This noble disciple reflects thus: ‘I am not the only one who is the owner of one’s kamma,

the heir of one's kamma; who has kamma as one's origin, kamma as one's relative, kamma as one's resort; who will be the heir of 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; all have kamma as their origin, kamma as their relative, kamma as their resort; all will be heirs of whatever kamma, good or bad, that they do.' As he often reflects on ~~this~~ [these] theme[s], the path is generated. He pursues this path, develops it, and cultivates it. As he does so, the fetters are entirely abandoned and the underlying tendencies are uprooted...."

One of the things that I want to emphasize from this is that simply by working with any one of these five themes is a wholesome practice. We practice with them by recognizing with mindfulness and clear comprehension when we are "intoxicated" and then letting go. We practice with mindfulness and clear comprehension seeing things just as they are, seeing that each of these themes is true in our own lives, and then resting in that knowledge, taking it into our hearts.

When we practice with these themes in this way, we are preparing for the times in our own lives, and those of our loved ones, when sickness, old age and death do arise. We are preparing so that we can possibly meet these realities with an attitude that fosters peace, goodwill, compassion, harmony, and some degree of fearlessness both in ourselves and in those who care for us.

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Notes

1. AN 5.57 - Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., <https://suttacentral.net/en/an5.57> (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/deed.en_US)

[Changes to the text: 1) Ellipses (...) indicate a repeating phrase or sentence in the original that was removed to shorten the text without, I hope, damaging the meaning. 2) Third to last sentence in the text was altered with strikethrough and brackets to make the last three sentences reference all of the themes and not just the last one.

Sutta also at Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2012, pp. 686-689.