

Urgency of Practice

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Part I –The Urgency of Practice

I will begin my Dhamma talk today with a question. Tell me, how many of you want suffering? Put up your hands if you want suffering. Good, no one in our audience today wants suffering. Unfortunately, even though none of us want suffering, most of us do not know what needs to be done to reduce or eliminate suffering. Even though we may have a conceptual understanding of the Four Noble Truths, most of us accumulate wealth and possessions, and seek sense pleasures thinking, “This will reduce suffering and lead to happiness”. However, the cause of suffering is not the lack of material wealth and comforts. If it were, then you could avoid suffering in this manner. All of you have comfortable homes, vehicles, good obedient children and many possessions but you still face suffering. You still cannot escape from old age, sickness, separation and death. We do not see that all that we accumulate and cling to, as pleasurable and belonging to me (mine), eventually leads to suffering.

Good friends, by listening to the Dhamma talk given by Venerable Sudassana you can learn how to eliminate suffering. It is not by accumulating wealth and possessions that you eliminate suffering. It is by listening to the Dhamma and being inspired to practice the proper way that you eliminate suffering. Today I am going to tell you four stories that will illustrate the urgency of practice.

1. The Importance of a Dhamma Friend (*Kalyana Mitta*)

The first is a story that took place a very long time ago at the time of the Kassapa Buddha. Our Bodhisatta was born into the Brahmin caste as a young man by the name of Jothipala. His best friend from childhood was a young man of low cast named Gatikara. The two were inseparable friends and loyal to each other. Unbeknown to Jothipala, Gatikara, inspired by the teachings of the Kassapa Buddha, had practiced and realized the spiritual state of Non Returner (*Anagami*). Gatikara invited Jothipala to listen to the Dhamma of the Kassapa Buddha. However, Jothipala was not interested and did not want to go. Gatikara then invited him instead to bathe in the river. The playful Jothipala agreed.

When they were bathing and playing in the water, Gatikara caught hold of Jothipala by his long hair and ducked him underwater. Then saying he would not let him go unless Jothipala agreed to hear the teaching of the Kassapa Buddha, he firmly held his head under water. Realizing that there must be a very strong reason for his loyal friend to make such a strong request, Jothipala agreed. At that time it was unheard of for a low cast person to touch a high cast person. To behave in such a disrespectful manner was an outrage. Jothipala, who knew his friend well, did not get angry or offended. Instead,

understanding that there must be a very important reason for his friend's disrespectful and dangerous behavior, he agreed to go.

Jothipala was immediately inspired by the teachings of the Kassapa Buddha and wanted to ordain. He asked Gatikara why he was not ordaining under the Kassapa Buddha. When Gatikara explained that he had to take care of his elderly blind parents, Jothipala decided to join the Noble Order by himself. Studying and grasping the teachings quickly, Venerable Jothipala became a great teacher and asset in the dispensation of the Kassapa Buddha. It is said that it was as if a second Buddha had appeared in this era.

Good friends, see how a person who was not interested in the Dhamma changed to be an asset to the Buddha Sasana through association with a good Dhamma friend. A Dhamma friend (*kalyana mitra*) is rare and essential for your spiritual growth. When you find a Dhamma friend that inspires you such as the Venerable Sudassana you should not delay. You should use every opportunity to further your knowledge and practice.

2. Inspired to Practice

There are many types of people in the world. The Buddha said that there are some people who will use their wealth or sell their possessions and get money to look after their limbs. For example, a person who has to replace a kidney may sell his property and obtain the money required to get a new kidney. Some people give up parts of their limbs to save their life. For example, some amputate their legs that are infected with gangrene so that they can live. "A great man" the Buddha said, "gives up wealth, limbs, and his life for Liberation." The second story is about such a great man.

Many years ago in Sri Lanka, there lived two wealthy parents who had two sons. When the two sons grew up the parents who were getting old, divided their wealth equally between the children and handed over the management of their land to their sons. Shortly after this, the elderly parents passed away. The older son, Tissa, was a very thoughtful and reflective person. He saw devotees walk past his house daily with flowers and lamps, and curious to see why they were going every evening to the temple, decided to join them. The younger brother got married.

Before long, inspired by the Buddha's teachings, Tissa decided to ordain. He approached the Venerable monks and requested ordination. The Venerable monks asked Tissa if he had got permission to ordain from his loved ones. Tissa informed the monks that he only had a younger brother as he was not married and his parents had passed away. Then the monks asked Tissa to get permission from his younger brother, his only remaining relative.

Tissa's younger brother, who was very fond of him, started to lament and cry. Saying that he no longer had a mother or father and his brother was now everything to him, he offered his share of the wealth to his older brother to encourage Tissa to remain in the lay life. Tissa, however, who had understood the inevitable separations and sufferings in life

had made up his mind to ordain. Offering to give all his wealth to his younger brother, Tissa reasoned and pleaded with him and obtained permission to ordain. Then, wearing rag robes and taking a begging bowl, Tissa ordained and went to the forest to meditate in a cave.

The younger brother and his wife were now very wealthy land owners. After some time the wife of the younger brother who was enjoying her immense wealth was overcome by greed. She thought, "If our elder brother changes his mind and disrobes and comes back his share of the wealth would need to be given back to him". Calling some assassins in secret, she gave a large sum of money and hired them to kill the Venerable monk. Giving direction to the forest cave she promised them an even larger sum of money when the crime was completed.

Taking the money, the assassins set out to find Venerable Tissa. As they approached the cave the Venerable monk extended a greeting and asked why they had come. The assassins informed the monk that they had come to kill him. As he had harmed no one, the innocent monk asked as to why they wanted to kill him. The assassins informed him that they had already got a large sum of money and would get even more when the job was done. They informed the monk that they were killing him on account of the large sum of money promised.

Venerable Tissa who realized the dangers of this samsaric journey and the opportunity he had to practice then asked the assassins to grant him just one more day. The assassins laughed saying that they were not fools that he was a cunning old monk who would run away the moment they set him free. Drawing their swords they surrounded Venerable Tissa and prepared to kill him.

The Venerable Tissa then picked up a large rock with difficulty, raised it high above his head, and dropped it on his feet. He broke the bones of his feet for the sake of the Buddha Dhamma. Understanding the dangers of this samsaric journey he reflected thus: Many a times in this samsaric journey have I broken my feet by falling and striking tree roots and stumps. Many a time have I died of accidents and fatal injuries. Understanding the dangers of remaining in samsara even for one more birth, I will sacrifice my feet and life to attain release from suffering. The assassins realizing the purity of the Venerable monk left him.

Venerable Tissa could no longer practice walking meditation. The pain in his feet was excruciating. Meditating on the pain, with effort and immense confidence in the Buddha Dhamma, the Venerable Tissa attained Liberation (*Arahanthship*). Persons such as Venerable Tissa who are inspired and have confidence in the Buddha Dhamma are rare. The Venerable Tissa had the wisdom to understand the dangers of this samsaric journey. If we could see the suffering we have faced in the past we may, like Venerable Tissa, have the courage and confidence to make similar sacrifices. But the sufferings of our past are veiled in ignorance. Venerable Tissa was indeed a great man for he gave up his wealth, limbs and life for liberation.

This samsaric journey is very long and dangerous. The Buddha has said that we have cried more tears over the death of our loved ones than the waters of the four great oceans. We have taken animal birth and shed more blood in death than the waters of the four great oceans. In fact we have taken animal birth more times than we have taken human birth. People think that this is an exaggeration. But the Buddha does not tell lies or exaggerate to encourage us on the path. We do not have the courage and determination of the Venerable Tissa because we have not as yet seen or understood the dangers of samsara.

3. The Dangers of False View

The third story is about a wealthy couple that had three children. They had two sons and a daughter. The parents were foolish and had false views. The father was a farmer who was so attached to his fields that it was all that he did. His whole life was farming and accumulating wealth. The mother was busy in keeping a beautiful house and was totally involved in household tasks. The daughter was enraptured by her beauty and the beauty of the gardens and lake they owned. And the younger brother like the others was only bent on accumulating wealth. Only the older brother was different. He followed the teachings of the Buddha and was inspired by the teachings.

Before long the older brother ordained, mediated with great effort, and attained *Arahanthship*. Despite the fact that they had a great *Arahanth* as a son and a brother, none in the family gave any alms to their kinsman. They continued accumulating wealth and taking care of the needs and comforts of each other. As they were all like-minded they got on well with each other, and were very attached to each other. Their household revolved around their own personal needs, wealth and comfort. The years passed and the family continued accumulating wealth. After some years the parents died of old age and shortly after the sister died of a grave sickness. The younger brother inherited the family wealth and lived in comfort, but did not change his ways.

One day the younger brother had killed a large pig that had wandered into his field and was taking it home to cook when he met his older brother on his alms round. Thinking that he had a lot of meat just for himself, he invited his brother to his house for alms. The Venerable monk accepted his younger brother's invitation but asked him not to cut up the pig until he came to his house. The younger brother thinking that he would cut and serve a freshly cooked meal agreed. He then rushed back home to prepare a seat and await his older brother.

The Venerable monk arrived at their ancestral home and requested the younger brother to cut open the stomach of the pig carefully. Inside he said he would find a large snake. He then requested his younger brother to cut open the stomach of the snake; inside he said would be a partially digested large frog. The monk then asked his younger brother if he knew who the pig, snake and frog were. When his brother replied that he did not know the Venerable informed his brother with compassion that the pig was his former father, the snake his mother and the frog his sister. He then urged him to change his ways, and

practice the teachings of the Buddha. The younger brother was moved by the effects of their false view and selfish way of life. He still loved and missed his parents and younger sister. He changed his ways by following the advice and teachings of his older brother.

We should not delay and sacrifice our practice of the Dhamma because of children, parents and others. Understand that however much we love our children that we do not own them. We cannot control their lives by saying they are mine. How can we, when we cannot even control our own life as “me” and “mine”? After death, they whom we loved so much may take birth even as food for each other. We may even take rebirth as enemies. So dangerous is this samsaric journey.

We now live in a Buddha era. Having taken human birth in a Buddha era if you are not practicing because of children or wealth, then this is an unfortunate environment that you were born to. As we grow older and fulfill our obligations to our children we should understand the dangers of this samsaric journey and let go.

How can you say I have sons and wealth and think that you will not face suffering? Can you control this body that you call mine and prevent it from sickness and old age? Can you prevent it from becoming a corpse and oozing pus and fluids at death? Why then are you content saying that you have sons and wealth. Why when you can see others age and die all around you are you heedless.

When the neighbor’s house is robbed you watch over and protect your house by staying up all night. You lock the doors and install an alarm system. But when you see others growing old and dying you take no notice. You do not see that you too have aged. You think that death is not for me it is for others. I still have time. You are not afraid. But when you die you give up all your possessions. Even more so than what was robbed in your neighbor’s house. Death robs you off all your possessions. But still you are without fear. It is our defilements that give us this false sense of courage. It is delusion that makes us feel that it will not happen to us. No one knows when it is time for us to go.

You cannot win by letting the mind do whatever it wants. If it is children and accumulation of wealth that you think brings freedom from suffering, then this is a narrow view. When you fall to sorrow no one will come to save you. This body will eventually fall sick and get old. Even if the children love you they cannot take away your old age and give you back your good health and youth. Can they take some of your pain? Why are you so foolish? So take care of yourself. You have done so much for others, now it is time to think of yourself. Understand the nature of this life with wisdom. You do not understand the value of the Dhamma. You practice not because the Buddha said “thus” or the Venerable monk said “thus”. Question and see if you can enjoy these possessions forever. If you can get at least this much in the next birth of this samsaric journey then that is fine. But it may not happen like this. When you listen to the Dhamma you agree but later when you go home you forget. Do not delay like the crow did. I have not as yet told you the story of the crow. I will now tell you the story of the crow.

4. Do not Delay

The fourth story happened in the Himalaya forest where a large elephant had died. There were heavy rains for many days that resulted in a flood. The carcass of the elephant was swept away with the flood waters to the Ganges River. The elephant carcass was slowly going down the river. A greedy crow saw the carcass. Seeing the easy access to food, it perched on the elephant and tore at its flesh. After satisfying his hunger he drank some water from the river. He ate and drank, and ate and drank. What more did he want? All he needed was right here. The crow decided to live on the elephant and not fly around seeking food anymore. Even though the crow thought that he was not going any place the elephant was slowly going down river into the sea. And it was taking the greedy crow with it even though he thought that he was stationary. Before long he was taken far out to sea by the big waves.

The greedy crow was busy eating and drinking. It took him a long time to realize that only a small piece of the elephant carcass was left. Realizing that he would have to look for food elsewhere, he started to fly in search of food, but he was in deep deep water, far away from any land. He flew this way and that way but could not find any land in sight. Exhausted, he flew back towards the elephant carcass, but that too was gone. The scraps that were left had been eaten by hungry fish. The exhausted crow fell into the sea and was immediately eaten by large hungry fish.

Many of us are like the crow. Of course we have to eat to live. If the crow ate in moderation and left the carcass before it fell into the sea he would have survived, but he remained attached to the carcass until it was too late. Thinking, “Who is the fool who will give up a good thing”, the crow clung to the elephant until it was too late. We too often cling to our wealth, children, and possessions until it is too late. When we see the dangers of old age and sickness we have reached the point of no return. Unbeknown to us we have grown old. We cannot hear any more and we cannot see well. Our concentration and energy are weak. We have forgotten that in the end, when we die, even the wealth and children have to be left behind. Do not wait until it is too late like the crow. Realize that we are slowly moving towards the deep sea of old age, sickness and death. Let go and practice when you have the good health and energy.

Part II – The Cause of Suffering

We cannot see and understand this urgency because of ignorance. Very rare is the person who has the wisdom to understand this urgency. Very rare in deed is a Buddha era. If in this Buddha’s time we can come to a stable state (*sotapanna*) we have not wasted this opportunity. Remaining in samsara is suffering and we all want relief from suffering. We have all faced sickness and separation from those we love. But we have tried to reduce suffering by accumulating wealth and sense pleasures. It is time now to understand the real cause of suffering. Then you will realize that accumulating wealth and sense pleasures is not going to eliminate suffering.

When it is raining and the roof leaks you know what to do. You know that the roof needs to be fixed. What happens if you cover the roof without first locating the hole? You may then cover the wrong place. This is what most of us do in life. We do not want suffering, but without finding the cause of suffering, we find the solution. Then we wonder why we still have suffering. Wealth, possessions and children are not the solution to suffering. They are not the solution because they are not the cause of suffering. You have to first understand the cause then you can come up with the solution. Similarly, you have to first find the hole; then you can cover the leaky roof.

Cause of Suffering – Craving, Grasping and Wrong View

We will use this example to illustrate the cause of suffering and how suffering arises. You must remember this example and always keep it in mind. Then you will not be confused into thinking that the solution to suffering is wealth and sense pleasures.

Let us imagine that you found a beautiful stone and had it valued. You are thrilled to find that your gem is worth millions of dollars. The moment you know of the value of the gem the quality of your mind changes. Strong liking (craving - *tanha*) arises. You did not have to make yourself like it. Desire and attachment for the gem arose in your mind automatically. Next you take pride in ownership. This valuable gem is mine. Then craving (*tanha*) turns to grasping (*upadana*). This too arises in the mind automatically.

Then fear arises in the mind. Thoughts of protection follow. You start to look for places to hide the gem. You hide it in the closet, under the mattress or even in the chili or flour bowl. It's got to be someplace a thief will never look. Now even leaving the house is stressful. You are even watchful and suspicious when your neighbor visits. You are afraid that someone will steal your precious gem. But it does not stop there. You buy a gun, sword or pole to protect the gem. After all it is worth millions of dollars. If any one comes to steal it you most certainly will shoot or strike them. This is my gem and it is worth millions. Liking turned to grasping and fear. Now your normally gentle and harmless mind is gross and ruthless. You are even planning how you would yell and kill the thief who may come to steal it.

From the day you found the gem, the quality of your mind has changed. First strong liking, then grasping, then fear of theft, and finally even thoughts of ill-will and hatred have entered your mind. All of these changes arose in your mind because you found a valuable gem. They also arose automatically. You are now even ready to kill to safeguard your gem. See how your mind has got polluted.

Now just imagine what would happen if you lose your precious gem. You may weep and lament, you may even faint and get furiously angry at the thief. You may even start planning the thief's punishment when he is caught. You can find the details of this story in the *Diga Nikaya* in the *Maha Nidana Sutta*. Read it and see if this is not true. What do you think will happen if you die in this state of mind? If you die in this state of anger and strong attachment you may even take rebirth as a hungry ghost - *a pretha*. What have you

done? You have lost your freedom because you are afraid to leave the house. You suffer in this life protecting it and if you lose it you suffer in both this life and the next by grieving after it. Now it does not matter if you have the gem or you lose the gem. In either case you suffer. What if you had a thousand valuable gems? How much will you suffer then? Is it then not suffering that you have protected as a valuable gem?

You are like the insect that flies to the flame of the lamp because he is attracted by the light and warmth. He does not have the wisdom to realize that his source of pleasure is suffering until it is too late and he burns. The insect does not want suffering but he is attracted to fire that burns and causes suffering. We are like this too. We do not like suffering, but we are attracted to the gem that causes suffering both in this life and the next. Just like the little insect, we do not have the wisdom to see that our source of pleasure eventually results in suffering.

The Absence of Craving and Grasping – Insight and Right View

Let us now see what happens if you decide to sell the gem. The first merchant examines the gem and says it is a worthless gem. Yelling at him and accusing him of robbery you leave in anger. You find another merchant who confirms the fact that it is just a worthless glass stone. What then happens to your liking and grasping of the gem? It leaves you automatically. The quality of your mind changes automatically. No liking, no grasping, no fear, no ill-will, anger and hatred. No more suffering in this life and the next. Yet it is still the same object. The only thing that has changed is your view. Your view of the gem has changed from wrong view to right view.

Someone lies and tells you that it is worth a million dollars and the quality of your mind changes. So long as you view it as a valuable gem you will suffer. Whether you have the gem in your possession or you lose it you will suffer. This is what happens when you have wrong view. If you see the object of suffering (gem) as pleasure and happiness craving, grasping, fear, ill-will, anger and hatred, all of which leads to suffering will arise. It will arise automatically. When you have right view and see it for what it really is, there is no more suffering. The release from suffering is instantaneous. The change in mind happens automatically.

We see this world, and our house, cars and wealth as mine and attach to it because it is seen as pleasurable. Due to delusion and ignorance we do not see things as they really are. All that we cling to and grasp are sources of suffering. All sense pleasures are sources of suffering. When we have right view and see the gem as it really is, there is freedom from suffering. The suffering just falls away. We no longer attach and grasp at the gem.

We see the world as permanent, self and pleasurable. This is a false view that leads to craving, grasping, fear and suffering. The world is impermanent, it is not self, and it is difficult to endure (*dukkha*) this is right view. When we see things the way they are, then there is no suffering. Craving, grasping fear and suffering just disappears automatically.

It disappears just as it disappeared when you realized that the gem was worthless. This is what we need to strive towards. We need to strive towards right view – or seeing things as they really are.

We cannot pray or wish for right view. We have to develop insight through meditation. Rocks sink when thrown into water. They will not float just because you pray for it to float. It is the nature of the heavy rock to sink in water. In the same way, all phenomena are impermanent, not self and difficult to bear. This is the nature of all things. You cannot change it through wishing and praying. You have to see it for yourself. You have to develop insight and right view and see it the way it is. When you do, craving, grasping, fear and suffering will automatically fall away.

A Balanced Life

People see suffering as arising from outside of ourselves. This is false view. As a lay person you have to earn money, you have to have a house to live in, and you must strive towards having the basics required for a comfortable life. Nobody is saying that a lay person should not do so, but you should not live to work. You should work to live.

We collect money build houses, buy cars and have children. We must make sure that we also balance this side of our life with our spiritual growth. This is how you can avoid suffering. You cannot be free from suffering by accumulating huge amounts of wealth and strong attachments and grasping. You have to let go before it is too late.

Do you know the story of the man who cleans drains? I will tell you. There once was a dedicated drain cleaner. He cleaned drains and made a living to support his family. He was good in his work and well respected for the quality of his work. In the evenings he planned his next day's route and cleaning of drains. He wanted to make sure that he did his job well and nothing went wrong. He who started out cleaning drains to live is now living to clean drains. Do not become a drain cleaner.

Instead have a balanced life. The purpose of life is freedom from suffering. No one put their hand up when I asked if any one present wanted suffering. To achieve this one must develop right view and see things as they are. One must see the gem as a worthless glass stone. Then one will automatically let go and craving, grasping fear and suffering will fall away. At least in the evenings and night we should be striving for freedom from suffering. If this does not happen then we are not true Buddhists.

Do not spend the evenings on sense pleasures and accumulating wealth thinking this is the way to freedom from suffering. This is why we are still traversing in this samsaric journey. You know now, that this is not the way. This is a Buddha era and a fortunate time. So use this opportunity to strive for freedom from suffering the right way. At least work towards a stable state in this birth (*sotapanna*). Then you will not fall away and take birth in an unhappy plane.

Buddha's come into this world for those who meditate and strive for right view. If sense pleasures are seen as right view then we cannot come out of suffering. Use this opportunity to see things as they really are (impermanent, difficult to endure and not self). Then you will escape from suffering.

Sadu sadhu sadhu

May all beings be well and happy.

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