

News and Musings

March 30th, 2020

From Ven. Ajahn Khemadhammo OBE



For a long time, I've believed that as you – prisoners - cannot come to the temple, we must take the temple to you. Now, sadly, I can't come in and be with you and conduct meditation groups and speak to you directly as I used to but at least we can meet briefly once a week on Wednesday mornings at around 7:25, repeated again at 11:25, on National Prison Radio. My first talk, in case you missed it, has been on the Three Divine Messengers and the Human Condition.

You'll remember that before his Enlightenment the Buddha was a prince. All his life he'd had whatever he wanted, he'd been spoiled rotten and lived in the lap of luxury. At sixteen he'd married a beautiful princess and by the time he was twenty-nine, with a beautiful young wife, a new-born child and everything he could possibly wish for, he appeared all set to live happily ever after. But then came the Three Divine Messengers.

We are told that one day he went out in his chariot for a drive through the countryside and it was then on what was supposed to have been a pleasure jaunt that he saw a very, very old person, a very, very sick person and a very, very dead person. Each of these three sights he had to have his charioteer explain to him, for he had never seen anything like them before. Channa, the charioteer, patiently spelt out for him that in each case this is what happens to human beings, these are all part of the human condition. We're all ageing by the minute and if we live long enough, we become old, very old and it's painful and unpleasant. Then, at any time we can become unwell and some may become very sick indeed. And all of us are bound to die. It's one thing we can be absolutely certain of. None of us are going to get out of this alive! Having encountered these three divine messengers we know that the Prince also saw a holy man and the sight of him inspired the Prince to do something about understanding and transcending the ordinary human condition. The result: The Prince eventually became the Buddha.

These three, ageing, sickness and death, known as the Divine Messengers in Buddhist literature, remind us of the reality of our human condition that we usually don't want to know about nor really face up to. But there it is, we must learn to take nothing for granted. We are subject to all three and really ought to get used to them,

then there are no surprises when you realise your hair is turning grey, or your nearest and dearest becomes terminally ill. Not only that but when we fail to heed the warning signals of old age, sickness and death we're inclined to think that none of this is going to happen to us, and become negligent, behaving recklessly, being selfish and unkind and living only for ourselves. Just look at what's been happening in the last few days: in spite of the threat of coronavirus and powerful advice to maintain social distancing, people have been crowding into markets, visiting parks and beauty spots in droves and riding in packed underground trains. But human beings will follow their desires and delight in their attachments and remain blind and deaf to the Three Divine Messengers. This is not good and will never be the path to a happy destiny and a good rebirth.

There was once an occasion when the Buddha was in conversation with a certain King and he asked the King what he would do if four messengers, one from the north, another from the south, another from the east and yet another from the west all came to him with identical messages: that from each of these directions a great mountain, as high as the clouds, was rolling in upon him. What would he do? 'What else should I do,' replied the King, 'In the face of such a calamity, such a terrible destruction of human life, but live by the Dhamma, live righteously and do good and meritorious deeds.' 'Even so,' said the Buddha, 'Ageing and death are crowding in upon you.' The King admitted that none of his tremendous resources, neither his armed forces or his fabulous wealth or his wise and brilliant advisers could possibly defeat ageing and death, and replied, 'As ageing and death are crowding in upon me, what else should I do but live by the Dhamma, live righteously and do good and meritorious deeds.'

I'll say more about living by the Dhamma, the precepts and the practice of meditation in the weeks to come, but let's get back to where we came in, the coronavirus, the Divine Messengers shouting at us, and with the country in lockdown,

warning us to pay attention and use our precious human birth wisely. Try to do no harm to yourself or another, quieten, still and investigate your mind.

May you and all beings be well and happy and at peace.

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