

[Buddhist Encounters: Finding a Home in the Human Condition]

## Three Great Messengers

Dr. Lewis R. Lancaster

Emeritus Professor, University of California, Berkeley

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### 1. The Persistent Message of Illness

One of the most beloved stories in Buddhism is that of the Four Messengers who greeted a youthful Sakyamuni as he rode his chariot through the city. During this event, he came in contact with illness, the First Messenger. Before the startled prince's gaze, a very sick person laid on the street moaning in agony. The young man, repulsed by what he saw, could not readily accept the reality of illness as an integral part of human life. And yet, this disturbing vision was a crucial aspect of his preparation to fulfill his destiny as a Buddha.

Like Sakyamuni, we have had to face illness that shocks our emotions and our concept of the social fabric. COVID came upon us at a time when our technology had transformed and empowered science. In the years before 2020, we could feel that we were doing a pretty good job of handling life. In retrospect, it was a golden era of travel, global commerce, advances in medical surgery and treatments, and a digital revolution that had transformed communication and management of data. We took it all for granted and it is only now that we realize what a treasured time it was. Our messenger of illness, COVID, has been especially harsh and unrelenting. It would not let us just brush it aside any more than Sakyamuni could ignore his messenger of illness. We could not retreat to the comfort of denial. As deaths mounted and hospitals filled beyond their capacity, it was necessary to go into isolation, shut down business, close offices, empty airports, it even forced schools to limit instruction to the internet. The message: we must not forget the fragility of our human condition. All of us can at any

moment be subjected to forces of nature over which we have little or no control.

With all our technology, we were able to do something that had never happened in a pandemic, we quickly developed vaccines that slowed the spread, lessened the effects of the disease. However, the microbe was not so easily erased. Our relief to have a vaccine was soon tempered by the news that with millions of infected people, the microbe was undergoing rapid mutation. Those mutants were different enough to challenge the effectiveness of vaccines and COVID continued to respread once again around the globe. Whether from South Africa, New Jersey, London, or Mainland China, mutations continued to kill thousands and created long-term health conditions. As Mark Twain said, we have been reminded over and over about our human condition. Sakyamuni lived a privileged life with youthful health and it pained him to learn that illness comes to us all. Like him, we do not want to hear bad news. It is very striking that when the 1918 flu receded, few spoke of it, or tried to remember what it was like. And yet, even a hundred years later, we take an annual flu shot to deal with mutations that date back to 1918 and beyond. Thus far, I have only found one film that depicts what happened when COVID closed our normal life for a period of time. We do not want to watch the experience replayed in drama. We want to forget it ever happened. There is a movement to erect a memorial to all those who have perished from the disease. We have thousands of memorials to wars, battles, famous people, and I wonder how a memorial to COVID will be accepted.

It is always difficult to hear the message of the First Great Truth taught by the Buddha—there is suffering. And when we want to have an unmoving target for our vaccines it is equally sad to hear that nothing is in a permanent form. Everything is in constant flux and this includes microbes as well as our human condition.

What are we to learn from this? What is the response that we can make to the fearsome prospect of constant change that can bring with it unwanted



Any life can be vulnerable to virus invasion at any moment.

effects? Some of the canonic texts tell us that when we fully understand these aspects of the human condition, one response can be compassion for all living beings. When we meet someone at the checkout stand in the grocery store, we can remember that they are like us in being subjected to human conditions. If we can have this thought with every person we contact, our first impulse will be deep sorrow that they, like us, are struggling in the stormy sea of human life. To fully understand this moment, we have to first accept our own place in the human condition. Unless we know that we are like all other beings in this condition, there can never be compassion. Compassion can only be with equals, with someone who has the same pain as ourselves. The message of illness is so powerful because we are all potentially subject to it and we understand the discomfort of a high fever, aches, or nausea. Health workers live with the anguish of illness. There is nothing so comforting as a kind word from a nurse or doctor when we are faced with illness, to hear one of them say, “Just try to relax, I am here and I will take good care of you.” When we think that the illness has passed and that we have immunity, it is easy to slip back into a state of complacency, the very opposite of compassion. When we are ill and recover our health, it does not mean that the human condition of illness has been overcome. Living beings are subject to illness in every moment, every day. Once I am recovered and have no symptoms, I tend to just return to my life and seldom think of the unpleasant moments. But we know that microbes are always with us and the illnesses caused by them are by no means conquered by our present technology, the microbes are indeed persistent.

The Buddha has been likened to a physician. His task was first to diagnose the illnesses of people around him. Only then could he be effective in giving a cure. The Prajnaparamita texts repeat that one of the meanings of Dharma is knowledge about “the way things really are.” Thus, whoever teaches in accord with “the way things really are” is a teacher of Dharma. So, with illness we need the Dharma to tell us the way things really are. At times, we fear the message and live in denial of symptoms. When we do so, it often results in long-term suffering or even death. I came to understand the importance of knowing the way things are. Some years ago, I began to suffer from repeated episodes of pneumonia. My trips to the clinics resulted in no clear knowledge of what was occurring. Finally,

after the fourth case of pneumonia, I met a bodhisattva in the form of a doctor who looked for the Dharma, looked for the way things were. She refused to give me any medication until she had a diagnosis. Even when the lab reported after a week of testing my specimen that they could find nothing, she asked them to do a rare extra week of repeating the tests. It was then that with DNA, they identified the microbe that was causing my repeated illness and could give me an antibiotic that worked. As you see, I recovered. This taught me that the Buddha was a very wise doctor, before teaching anyone, he searched for the cause of the illness, the ignorance that was blinding his listeners. Only then could he use the right teaching to remove the obstacle.

When the Buddha did his diagnosis for his audience and sought to learn the nature of their sickness, he gave us the result of his research. He reported that in addition to microbes, he found a different kind of illness in the Human Condition. Illness that could not be cured with herbs. These illnesses are like poisons. There are three of these major illnesses that infect us. This is the sickness brought on by the Three Poisons: Greed, Hatred, and Delusion. Much of the teachings, preserved in the Buddhist canons, deal with how to remove the malady of these Three Poisons, these three illnesses.

As we look back on those fearful days of the early COVID and the reaction of people, it is clear that in our human condition we not only suffered from a microbe, we also suffered from the presence of the Three Poisons. In one way, the battle with COVID turned from trying to control a microbe to a fierce battle to have power and control over other humans. The poison of Greed showed itself in the desire to have full control over others, to be the one with the power. It showed itself whenever we stubbornly held to ideas, not for the sake of health or healing but for our own sense of being right and of having worth. The poison of Hatred could be detected in our anger that dominated our actions whenever we felt that others were not responding to our needs and wishes. And the poison of Delusion drove us to resist the acceptance of the way things are and instead, acting as if our projections of reality are the same as reality. So, part of the tragedy of COVID has been the continued presence of the Three Poisons even as we had vaccines and medicines to treat the microbial disease. As I thought about this lecture and the potential for becoming involved in the angers and even hatred that seemed to

mark every action, whether it be wearing a mask, getting vaccinated, or avoiding contact, it seems to me that the Three Poisons are fully at play amongst us. I have had to recognize that I got caught up in living with the Poisons as the only way to deal with what was happening. I had anger, fear, rejection, rigid in my assurance of knowing the way to handle life. Fortunately, I have a wise teacher in my life, my sister. She showed me by example that it is possible to live in our present time without relying on the Three Poisons. She reminded me that people for whom I have the deepest affection may hold views that are the opposite of my own. I have to look within myself and find the strength to continue loving the best in others and not live in fear of what I consider to be their worst side. She urged me not to push people out of my heart.

It is very difficult to give such a lecture if the world offers only the options of being either a Progressive Liberal or a Right Wing Conservative. How do I want to be seen in this environment, which of the two sides identify me? As I contemplated these issues, there arose in me a fierce feeling, I want to be seen and I only want to teach as a Human. I want to have a focus that includes all of us, with whatever our beliefs. I want to see all as my fellow Human Beings, not identified by concepts. How wonderful any moment when one or more of the Three Poisons is removed. I am embarrassed to look back and see how easy it had been to fall into rejecting other opinions, to deny people any right to their own thinking. How easy to dismiss them with the thought that their position had no merit. How difficult it is to have a generosity of spirit that can still relate to someone who has opposite views.

This inventory of my own feelings and reactions let me see how difficult it is to appreciate someone who seems to dislike me and rejects me. And then came a question that I have never asked before. Can I ever accept that someone may not like me but I can like them? Is it possible that I can even like them without trying to change them or get them to like me? Is this what is meant by generosity? Is this the antidote to the poison of Greed? It is also perhaps the most difficult but most important way to practice Loving-Kindness when faced with Hatred. I think of this as relating to another as a Human. This is a practice that may be totally internal. It is not put forth in public to garner praise or to show how superior we are. I know that this can sound very impractical and can be seen as abandoning my

ethical beliefs. My only suggestion is that, in a most private way, I can hold to my principles without the need to attack another. I can try to heal myself even as the pandemic of the Three Poisons erupts all around me. Once I stop using the Three Poisons, can I work for what I believe to be important, with greater strength? My ability to deal with the Three Poisons will be so much more effective to the degree that I can remove them in my thoughts, in my emotions, and my immediate reactions. In medicine, there can be no cure that does not come to grips with the cause. We sometimes use poison to treat diseases, such as cancer. That should remind us that even one of the poisons does not have the nature of always being destructive. Sometimes anger gives us the energy we need. But pure anger is only a momentary reaction to an event, it is replaced by our thoughts and deeply embedded reactions, and we keep anger alive long after it has any merit. We need the skill to make use of the totality of our condition. That skill involves the way in which we deal with illness, whether it is caused by a microbe, a malfunction of my body, or by adverse effects of poisons both physical and mental. I promise myself to take special delight in any day when I have a sense of wellness, fully to live those experiences and not be unconscious of such moments. My persistent messenger of illness will always be there to remind me to treasure those positive feelings and live my life as fully as I possibly can.

## 2. The Future of Old Age

We return to the story of Sakyamuni's ride through the streets in his chariot when he met with the Great Messengers of the Human Condition.

On the second outing, Sakyamuni, as the young prince, caught sight of an old man, who was bent and weak as he struggled along leaning on a cane. Filled with youthful vigor, Sakyamuni couldn't believe that this was something that would happen to him. When he was told that all humans face old age, he was in despair and anger. If being young and strong is just a prelude to old age and weakness, then being young drops in his estimation. Throughout the texts of Buddhism, we find references to aging. It is defined as: decaying, broken down, turning gray, failing faculties, and in a poetic fashion a description of mobility,

*Thinking to step in one direction*

*I step in another*



We need to learn how to live with aging.

You would think that I am the right person for this lecture since I am now in my ninth decade of life. However, I have to tell you that old age came upon me unexpectedly. My first public recognition of my age came at an academic conference panel. A debate had arisen over one of the positions put forward by a speaker. To my great surprise, the chair of the panel said, “We have in the audience one of our elders, Professor Lancaster... let’s ask him to help us with this issue.” I wanted to shout that he had it wrong, that I was still a young scholar with promise, not an “elder” who has an answer to every problem. Let me try to show you how much of a surprise it was for me. Recently, I was driving to go shopping and as we paused at a stop light, suddenly without any warning, a car smashed into the rear of ours and it gave me a great shock. That is how I felt that day at the conference, sitting as one of the audience, not expecting to be identified as an old man. It was a shock. So, I can appreciate the story of the Sakyamuni who was shocked to find out that his destiny was old age. Looking back, I realize that it was not that old age just suddenly in that moment at the conference came upon me. My hair was already streaked with white that had been with me for more than a decade. I just hadn’t given recognition to any of these signs of advancing age. It is not aging that comes upon us suddenly, it is our admission of the reality of old age that finally jolts us and this seems to come upon us without any warning.

No one ever taught me about old age. I lived with the idea that one “grows up” and learns how to be a mature adult, and that is the end of the process. It took me some years of decline before I realized that learning how to be old is just as complex as “growing up.” If you go online for help with aging, there are thousands of offers that promise you can learn to evade old age, hold back the inevitable with supplements, exercises, genetic therapies, and cosmetic surgery. Actual help in how to live with aging is hard to find.

Someone once asked Suzuki Roshi of the San Francisco Zen Center, “What

is the major benefit of meditation?” They weren’t expecting his answer: “You meditate in order to enjoy old age.” He didn’t say the meditation would delay or reverse aging, but that it would help with the process of living through those years, perhaps with pleasure.

The novelist Toni Morrison holds that a story is not about the story, it is about something else of importance in life. The story of Sakyamuni seeing an old man is not what the story is about, rather it is about change and the discomfort that comes with it. How are we to understand Suzuki Roshi’s answer about meditation and old age? If old age is just one aspect of change, then we can reword his answer “you meditate in order to deal with change.” What is the problem with change? We live with it all around us. Everything is undergoing it moment by moment. The problem with change is that we very often have a feeling of pain when it happens. How can we have change that is not tied to suffering? In meditating, the practitioner’s focus is on breathing. Counting each breath is a way to focus the mind and still the thoughts that overwhelm us. Breathing and observing our thoughts show us that breath comes in and goes out, and a thought arises, survives for a millisecond and then disappears. This rise and fall of thoughts and breathing are our most basic experiences of change. The goal of meditation is to have the experience of this change without any suffering. If we have mastered any part of dealing with change without suffering, we will be better prepared to face old age.

Learning to live with change requires practice. Some years ago, I decided that when I was getting a new car it gave me a good opportunity to deal with change. I picked it up at the dealers, its surface was shiny, unblemished without a single dent, the engine purred with power and it had a smell of newness. Climbing into it for the first time, I began to remind myself that all of these signs of newness would decay, the car would grow old and dented with some paint flaking, and the engine would come to need constant repair and replacements. My attempt was to expect to have these changes occur and since I was in expectation, I would not be caught unaware. I patted myself on my back for such a wise move and the first time someone scraped the side of the car in a parking garage, I was prepared. It was pleasing to be able to accept the damage to my car in a calm fashion. There was one fatal flaw with my practice of accepting change. I thought that “my” car would undergo these alterations. “My” car that I identified as “mine.” While I



was philosophical and at ease with the aging of “my” car, I did not include myself in the process. “I” remained permanent, not subject to the same changes as “my” car. Throughout the practice, I lived with the contradiction of “my” car growing old while I watched from a superior position of acting as if I was suspended in time and space. Not being aware of the fact that I was changing at the same time as my car, I was caught surprised and upset at the conference when shown to be an old man. I was living with the false idea of a permanent and unchanging self while thinking all the time that I was doing something very Buddhist by recognizing and accepting changes in the car.

Of all the things that change there is probably nothing that compares to old age. Every day is filled with noticeable and significant change; one’s body is no longer consistent, no longer functioning in a reliable fashion. How I feel today is no guarantee for tomorrow. If these rapid changes upset me and cause me pain and angst, then old age is guaranteed to be difficult. I think this is the major message I can see about the use of Buddhist practices in my final years of decline. The greatest gift is to have change without any regrets and any anguish. We might say that it is merely the need to come to grips with the way life is.

Not everyone is lucky enough to grow old. There is, after all, only one alternative to old age. A young friend asked me how I felt about being an old man. As I tried to find an answer, it came to me that old age is all that stands between me and death. So I was able to answer him saying in some ways, I delight in old age and consider it a significant gift. Nonetheless, it has been difficult to fully accept that I am forced everyday to learn something more about aging. Nothing I was taught has prepared me for the amount of time I have to spend taking care of an old body. Nothing I was taught has prepared me for the changes in my physical condition. Even when my balance and strength was no longer enough to ensure that I could walk safely, I delayed using a cane. I was ashamed to be seen as an old man needing one. Then I fell, walking up the path to the front door of my house, and suddenly a cane became my best friend.

The lessons keep on coming, now I have graduated to a rolling walker. Again, my ego rebelled at the idea of being someone who was so debilitated that I needed a walker. I had learned a bit more and decided to give myself fully to the walker. I ordered a bright red one and had my son paint yellow flames on the side,

indicating speed and power. Instead of trying to hide the change in my strength, I decided to embrace the walker and maybe enjoy it just a little.

Old age may not be the most pleasant experience in our lives, but ironically, technology and medical advances are adding years to our time as old people. We are being given longer and longer old ages, and few complain. The problem of the length of old age will become one of the most important issues for the world of tomorrow. Within the lifetime of anyone in their 20s the old will outnumber the young. Demographics already show that if present trends continue, in North America and Europe, there will only be one person still working for each person over 65. Japan has the longest life expectancy in the world. But with the lack of a birth rate that replaces the workforce, their government is already acutely aware of the problems. One possible solution is to create robots to care for the needs of the elderly. Toward this end, the Japanese government is currently spending one third of its budget on such robotic research. While the global population has nearly tripled since the middle of the last century, it has not been evenly distributed. Japan, Western Europe, Russia, and North America are having very low birth rates, while India, Indonesia, South America, Sub-Saharan Africa account for much of the increase. That is why I entitled this lecture, the Future of Old Age. It seems pretty certain that people will have to be productive for a longer period of their lives.

What does Buddhism have to offer for this future? First, these demographic issues will be global. The individuals living in the future would be wise to follow the example of the Buddha and put aside ethnic and racial biases, and focus on the welfare of all humans and all sentient beings. The very worst reaction will be governments waging war against each other. Such wars will only further decimate the young population, the opposite of what will be needed to care for aging citizens. At the present rate of births, by the end of this century, the population of Russia will be less than what is projected for Yemen. And the idea of control of such a vast landscape, one sixteenth of the earth's surface, will be beyond what is possible. The current war with hundreds of young men being killed is making this crisis even more acute for the future of the Russian people as well as for Ukraine.

In the near future, young people will be in high demand and cries against immigration will be muted in favor of having a sufficient work force to maintain

living standards. Given this situation, a world filled with old people will surely need compassion. Compassion for the aged and compassion for the young who must care for them. If we can be objective about the human condition, see it as it really is, recognize the need to work in harmony for the sake of survival, and have a compassionate populace, the future need not look so frightening. The time to start preparing for the future is now and we all need to be part of a solution. Old age can be a time of spiritual practice, a final period of fully expressing the depth of the human condition. I feel blessed to have had so much time as an old man. I also feel deep gratitude to all the younger group who help sustain me and allow me to still have a productive life. There is still much for me to experience and I thank those who are watching this lecture for giving me a chance to explore and search.

The landscape of life has been transformed...almost every aspect of life has been altered...education, relationships, jobs, and the future. We are all facing new circumstances. Our society is in many ways ill-equipped to handle such major upheavals such as a pandemic, violent weather that seems linked to climate change, and unprecedented inequality of wealth distribution. However, on this day, as an elderly person, I want to give you my very best wishes. In a time when all is shifting and there is uncertainty, it can be an opportunity to reset your life plans, find new ways to relate to others, perhaps even rescue the future by dedication to a life of integrity, compassion, and insight. It is your turn to take leadership roles and I feel grateful and encouraged by your strength and determination to continue to learn and share your abilities with others. Steve Jobs said at the end of his life, "If you want to go fast, go alone! But if you want to go far, go together!"

### **3. Death: The Last Moment of a Human**

Once again, we return to the journeys of Sakyamuni as he drove through the city streets and was shown aspects of the Human Condition. The message of the third trip was delivered when the young man spotted a corpse and wondered about it. He was told about death and absorbed the information that this lifeless body before him is similar to his own future, though he is young and vibrant. He despairs and is utterly disgusted to hear that his own body would give way to

impermanence and death. The Prince had received one blow after another on his trips, the first two messengers of illness and old age were bad enough but now to be told that death is the fate of all who are born, testing him to his limit. I know that these lectures on the Human Condition have been challenging in



Many people avoid discussing death, but it is a question that everyone must face.

that the topics are often seen as depressing and we try to avoid thinking about them. We are like the young Sakyamuni, feeling puzzled and having a sense of betrayal when confronting death. Woody Allen famously said, “I am not afraid of dying, I just don’t want to be there when it happens.” For years, I repeated this phrase and agreed wholeheartedly with it. But the Messenger of Death came to visit me. I was not expecting it. Traveling with a good friend on a flight from Australia, I was unprepared when he had a heart attack while we were in the air. The flight stewards were trying to give him aid, he smiled at them and thanked them for their concern. Then, as if a switch had been turned off, his head bowed down and he died in their arms. It was a sad moment for me but at the same time a wonderful one because I thought to myself, “This moment of death is not how I had imagined it...I can certainly handle what I just saw...and I can stop quoting Woody...I won’t mind being there.” From the scientific point of view of perception, we will not experience the final moment. That is to say, by the time our brain can process what has happened, consciousness and human experience will be gone. It is very positive to have one worry removed from my list—I don’t need to be afraid of the last moment.

The experience gave me insight into the Buddhist teaching that is related to rebirth. In the description of the first moment of a human life, the texts tell us that life starts when consciousness enters into our body and death is when

consciousness leaves it. The Buddha is said to have taught that there are five aspects of human experience. We have perception, generated by sensory input; this is followed by feelings negative, positive, and neutral, and then a third aspect of cognition, when we give a name to our perceived experience. Based on the three, perceiving, feeling, and cognition, we next have an impulse or energy to perform an action. And so, these aspects of experience culminate in consciousness, awareness, and knowing. Of the five aspects of human experience, it is consciousness that is seen to be the agent for rebirth. At the moment when the sperm enters the egg and conception occurs, at that moment, consciousness is thought to be joined with the other four aspects of human experience. The moment of death, for Buddhists, is the moment when consciousness separates from the other four aspects of experience. Seeing my friend on the plane simply close his eyes and bow down without any pain or suffering showing in his face or body, was that moment when consciousness departed from his physical body. I can now see why, when the Buddhists observed the death event, they interpreted it as the departure of consciousness. Standing in the aisle of the plane, when my friend died, I observed the instance when the body switch was turned off and consciousness and functioning life in that body was no more. I had an immediate observation of the very moment when consciousness left his physical body. It is easy to see why the Buddhists taught that death is the end of consciousness when the whole body is left motionless, silent, and the stillness of it is beyond any other state. After my father died, I had the opportunity to talk with the doctor who had been with him at his death. The young doctor said that it had been a memorable experience because even though all vital signs had disappeared from the monitors and he could not detect a pulse, my father still spoke to him and said, "It doesn't hurt anymore." Medical science has begun to pay much more attention to consciousness, rather than relying only on cardio-vascular functions. Buddhist observations that consciousness is the best marker for life and death is in line with current research. One can say that the doctor saw the power of consciousness and my father seemed to have a final function when consciousness had not yet left his body. From one perspective he was dead, but the last moment of consciousness was with him, enough air in his lungs and he spoke.

Today, in medicine we have many issues with defining when life begins

and when it ends. For example, when can organs be removed from a body for transplant? Once the body ceases to function, the success of an organ transplant depends on the speed of removal from the lifeless body. It is crucial to have a legal definition of the very moment when death occurs so that lawful surgery to remove vital organs can begin. Loss of body functions does not always mean that resuscitation is impossible. Thus, many of us have prepared a document to state our desire not to be resuscitated or have attempts made to do so. The transplant surgery is best done without waiting to see if heroic attempts can keep the patient alive. On the day my wife died, I heard the hospice nurse on the phone say, "She is actively dying." I sat with her for some hours as the process was taking place. Finally, I decided that I had to have a short break and took a walk around the block. When I came back 15 minutes later, she was gone. I was chagrined that my walk had taken me from her side at just the critical moment. The nurse comforted me by saying, "She just couldn't let herself go when you were holding her hand, she needed to have you out of the room so she could leave." She had suffered such pain for many days that my tears were partly in relief that she was no longer suffering.

Life is one of the great mysteries. When we analyze our body, there is no substance that can be found in every living organism that is not also in every inanimate object. Cells in our body are necessary for us to be alive but they are incapable of surviving without the processes of our physical being. If we have trouble defining life force, no surprise that we have difficulty determining when it is finished.

