

【Buddhist Encounters: Finding a Home in the Human Condition】

## The Human Condition in Crisis: Learning and Reflecting through a Buddhist Lens

Dr. Lewis R. Lancaster

Emeritus Professor, University of California, Berkeley

---

### 1. Human Condition

The basic reality in which I have experienced is living within the condition of being a human. It is here that we have our life.

Mark Twain once wrote, “We have to be taught again and again to be human.” We might echo his words by saying, “We have to be taught again and again about the human condition.” In the Buddhist traditions, the human condition is considered to be one part of the continuum of sentient beings. The teachings seldom limited comments to just the human conditions but more often spoke of “all sentient beings.” We share this planet earth with a myriad of sentient beings, and we know from the fossil records that various beings have come into existence and failed to survive. Survival of species is dependent on environment and it is not always assured. We have recently been taught or reminded once more that our survival is tied to the microbes that far outnumber humans. COVID has been our most recent teacher. The human condition can be dramatically shifted and even with the power of science and technology it is by no means stable or under complete control.

A compelling question is whether the human condition is limited to the surface of the earth with its layer of conditions that allow beings to exist and multiply. Our telescopes are constantly searching to see if there are similar planets out there in our universe. We want to know if we are the lone place of

the human condition or for sentient beings, and so we longingly look for signs of life on neighboring planets such as Mars. Supposing that our instruments locate a likely candidate many light years of distance from our solar system, there is no current way to reach that surface in a single lifetime or hundreds of lifetimes of travel. So where does this leave us at this very moment of time? Here we are on the beautiful blue planet that is covered in water with islands rising above the surface carried by moving tectonic plates that periodically quake and create giant tidal waves of water and energy. Billions of humans have spread around the globe and their activities are affecting the thin layer of atmosphere that can support our physical life. All of this saying, “We have to be taught again and again about the human condition.”

What do the Buddhist traditions have to say about the “conditions”? They make the point that it is not just humans but all sentient beings who are dependent on the “conditions” of organic life. Observation of other life forms teach us that we can document the demise of species that can no longer survive under present conditions. How long can humans survive if conditions are devoid of the necessary elements for our lives? All this disturbing news should arouse in us compassion. Every person we meet



Some species that lived on Earth tens of millions of years ago are now extinct.

on the street, see on the television, or contact through the internet, is with us in this moment of the human condition. I think that one way to practice compassion is to look at any person we are meeting and remind ourselves that they are in the midst of the human condition. They are subject to the shifts and changes that are beyond control. Our thoughts can be like seeing a person who is in a rough sea, just as we are. Whatever their background, heritage, gender, education, political opinions, we share equally the human condition. It is hard to hate someone who is facing conditions that can snuff out existence at any moment. Taking a moment

to remember this when we think of someone or speak to them allows us to communicate, to listen, to share, and to respect. In AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) Step Seven there is a prayer: “Give me the serenity to love their best and not fear their worst.” This compassion for the human condition is never denial of reality. It seems to me that it is the full acceptance of reality.

Can we survive in our human condition separated from all other beings? What happens to our condition when a number of other species disappear? The idea about the nature of the human body is constantly under review. At present, we have come to realize that our bodies are made up of millions of microbes. Without these microbes the body would be unable to survive.

One of the most dangerous concepts is any notion that we need not be concerned for other beings, that the earth only belongs to us. Within this way of thinking there is no need to be concerned about other beings and thus no need to worry when the myriad of life forms begin to disappear. From this perspective, the relationship that we humans have with all sentient beings has little to do with our survival.

The Buddhist traditions teach us again and again that we are part of the family of living beings. Our Sangha, our Community, is the totality of all organic life, and thus, we survive or disappear based on the conditions that surround our fragile existence. The current age is not based on technology—Iron Age, Bronze Age—it is the Age of Humans. Our activities are changing the whole of the planet. A billion years from now, the layer that we are adding to the surface of this earth will be marked by the presence of plastic. The fossil rocks dating to the twenty-first century will be noteworthy for the lack of biodiversity. Thousands of fauna and flora life forms will be shown to have failed in the move from one layer of rock to the next. We have begun to wonder how long human remains will continue to reappear over the eons?

Whether it is a giant telescope capturing light rays from billions of years ago or fossil filled rocks that record the presence of life forms, our human condition is both a part of the universe and an influence on the smallest of life formations. Buddhist teachings have been successful to the degree that they offer support and understanding of our humanness.

Sakyamuni, the founder of the Buddhist tradition, faced the challenge of

being awakened to his destiny as a human. Depicted as the son of a local ruler, his early life was one of luxury and entitlement; he was protected from the realities of life. While he was thought to have lived many lifetimes in the past, it was still necessary for him to be led to an acceptance of the role he was to play in helping this world deal with the difficulties of human existence. Only Three Great Messengers were powerful enough to tear away the veil that had been constructed around him by wealth and power. These Messengers were Illness, Old Age, and Death. Coming in contact with these three was not considered to be a curse, rather the Messengers are viewed as essential for us to come to grips with the true nature of life. The story of the encounters between them and Sakyamuni is viewed as one of the crucial moments in his story. He came to understand that life is impermanent, ever changing, lacking any aspect that is fixed and constant. His meeting with the Three is a cause for celebration among Buddhists, because they are seen as having given him a great gift of wisdom. It was they who set Sakyamuni on the road to enlightenment.

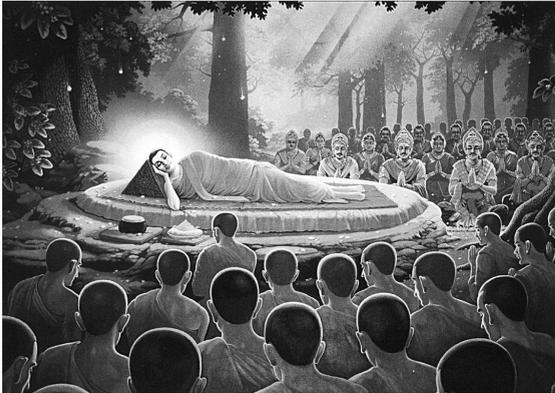
From the knowledge obtained from the Messengers, the second phase of the career of Sakyamuni begins. He became a wandering ascetic seeking to reach a level of insight that would give him the power to deal with the harsh realities of Illness, Old Age, and Death. After six years of wandering in the wilderness of the rainforest of the Ganges Basin, meeting one teacher after another, practicing deep trance states, and at times inflicting pain and deprivation on his body, he achieved a state of enlightenment. He became an Awakened One, the translation for the title... “Buddha.” Choosing the path of action, which was motivated by the wish to share his wisdom, he started to teach.

In his first “sermon” to five other ascetics, he spoke his first sentence in this new role. The sentence was “There is *Duhkha*.” We translate “*Duhkha*” as “suffering.” It can have a whole range of equivalents: “disappointment”; “dissatisfaction”; “physical pain”; “discontent”; “uneasiness”; “worry.” In one way, you can say that Buddhism teaches two things: “There is Suffering” and “There is release from Suffering.” The teaching period of Sakyamuni’s life lasted for nearly five decades.

During that time, he made repeated visits to urban centers that stretched for two hundred miles across the river systems of the Ganges. His teaching was in

many ways unique. He emphasized that the process of enlightenment starts with comprehending how we perceive the world. This is a difficult task because our sensory process is very powerful and our mind constructs a vivid and compelling picture that we take to be an accurate image of what is around us. But the “picture” is not identical to reality, it is always an amazing mental construction. Only when we become aware of the true nature of our experience, and that includes “suffering,” can we have the information necessary to deal with it.

The Buddha’s message was based on his experience. First, one must awaken to the realities of life that are the causes of sufferings. So, it is only when there is acceptance of the way things are, can we progress toward having a remedy or a release from the feelings of suffering, dissatisfaction, uneasiness, and pain. When the Buddha reached the age of eighty, he had a last visit with the Messenger of Death. Across Asia, Buddhists have depicted this moment of passing away. The



The Buddha entered Parinirvāṇa beneath the twin sāla trees.

Buddha is shown lying on his right side. Often people have tagged such images as the “Sleeping Buddha,” but that is totally false. We are shown an image of the result of his life of practice and awareness. What we have before us is that final moment when the Buddha enters into Nirvana. It was for him the moment when all suffering was forever gone.

## 2. Buddhism in the Time of COVID

The COVID virus came upon us. In a matter of weeks it became an official pandemic, that is, it went from a virus which was being spread (an epidemic) to a situation where the virus was found worldwide (a pandemic). This rapid spread alerts us to one of the important facts of contemporary life. We travel by air and distance that once took many weeks on sailing ships, now take hours

from our large cities to the most remote islands. Since the first appearance of COVID, 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 societies are in many ways ill-equipped to handle major upheavals such as: a pandemic; violent weather that seems linked to climate change; unprecedented inequality of wealth distribution.

I am surprised to feel how difficult it is to write about the pandemic. It already seems like ancient history and we are focused on the future, the post-COVID world. At one point, I thought to remove this portion from the book, to erase the lectures that were given at the height of the pandemic. Then, I contracted COVID and for the first time experienced the virus. It seems that I caught it while on a trip to Taiwan. While some people have mild symptoms, I was not so fortunate. The full force of the disease was upon me for nearly a month. Obviously, COVID has not disappeared and so I will not discard this lecture.

It is not as if this pandemic is unprecedented in human history. From the earliest histories, we are told of disease that shatters the norm and results in a restructure of society and culture. The so-called Black Plague (Bubonic Plague) of the fourteenth century still holds the record for the largest percentage of people killed by its microbes. We should not be surprised that pandemics arise, they are a common feature of history over the centuries, whether it is Roman Plagues of the sixth century, smallpox pandemics of the sixteenth century, Spanish Flu of 1918, or AIDS in the twentieth century. Microbes abound in the world and some of them make a jump from animal to humans.

We were already confronting SARS, MERS, Ebola, and Swine Flu before COVID appeared as a disease that could be transmitted from human to human through air borne particles. The spread of COVID remains a serious public health concern, though the global average fatality rate has dropped significantly since 2020. In the early days of the pandemic, eighty percent of the deaths were people over the age of sixty-five. Treatment of those who have survived must be given for lingering symptoms. Of even more concern is that the enormous burden of keeping patients alive puts psychological stress on healthcare workers. These frontline workers show signs of acute psychological stress and physical exhaustion that is increased by the appearance of new variants of the virus and

major spikes in its spread.

Where COVID was at first a disease of older people, the new variants have begun to affect the young population. The plea for people to take precaution and seek vaccination was often put as something to do for your grandparents who were so susceptible and faced the high rates of death among their numbers. Today, the message has shifted and younger people are asked to take care of themselves. Anxiety symptoms have begun to appear even among children and young adults. Lockdowns and closure of schools and businesses still affect every aspect of life. The ripple effects from these disruptions are expected to be felt for years to come.

I am asked to take this data and make applications to Buddhism and explore what answers or solutions are offered by the tradition. As I tried to think of what to say to you, my thoughts turned to the events in Sakyamuni's life.

He was living a life of privilege: young, healthy, handsome, wealthy, beautiful wife, first child, and a son. His chariot was something to behold as he rode with pride through the streets, an ancient equivalent of a Lamborghini. However, his protected life had left him unaware of reality. How does one tell such a person that they are vulnerable to life when their whole experience has been a sense of entitlement and arrogance bred from wealth, strength, and ease? To penetrate the shell of experience that had been built around such a young person required some major impact that is beyond their ability to ignore. The powerful impact needed in such a case cannot be manufactured or faked, it has to be tied to a natural and inevitable force. For Sakyamuni, it started with the jolt of the Three Great Messengers: Illness followed by Old Age and finally Death. As he rode through the crowds of people from his platform of superiority, his magnificent chariot, we are told that for the first time he spotted the Messengers, and he would never be the same.

As we look back on life before COVID, we see that we, as a global society, felt complacent, sure of our abilities to handle any situation, accumulating great wealth for a few, and uncaring for how our actions affected the environment. We were living much as Sakyamuni did as he rode his fancy chariot through the streets with only a thought for himself, the belief in his abilities to deal with whatever life brought. Such a state of being does not mean that Sakyamuni had overt hostility,

that he directed harm to those around him, or that he had a lack of compassion. In fact, we can live in an unconscious manner and perform many positive acts. The Buddhist story of Sakyamuni makes the point that his greatest days came after he became aware of what was going on in the world around him.

When we first became aware of COVID, it was viewed as inconsequential to the flow of our lifestyle. We were convinced of our ability to handle it. For a time, it was similar to the way in which people viewed the 1918 Flu Pandemic. The City Council of Philadelphia in the US wanted to have a large parade to celebrate the end of World War I and the

victory brought about by the strength of the nation. Already, the virus causing the Flu was present in the city and a few medical people warned that the parade would be dangerous. However, the Council and the Mayor rejected such depressing advice; the parade went forward with thousands of cheering people along the route. Within days, the deaths from the Flu began to mount and eventually more than 12,000 recorded fatal cases occurred in the city. There was no vaccine, no treatment, and no knowledge of what the virus was doing to infected bodies.

The sadness that settled over the nation and the world was made worse because most deaths were young adults in the twenty to forty year range. Of even more heartbreak was the fact that many young men were dying from the Flu just as they returned from the battlefields of Europe. Young men who had escaped the slaughter of war came home to be struck down with the infection and for many, death. We resist, we deny, we grow angry, and we try to find someone to blame when the pandemic takes its course, unresponsive to our needs and desires.

We have had to face the fact that control of the infection could not be accomplished by just focusing on our political boundaries. Mutation of the virus from any place on earth eventually appears before us, knocking on our own front door. If COVID has taught us nothing else, it has brought home the reality of living



A military hospital in Kansas, USA, overcrowded with soldiers diagnosed with the Spanish Flu. (Photo / AP)

in a global community. We cannot ride on our chariot of wealth and development sure of being shielded from what is happening in the crowd of people throughout the world. Sakyamuni rode through his city and saw the messengers, and though it saddened him, it also awakened him to the truth. We, too, ride through our cities filled with millions of people. Humans are congregating in cities and more live in them than in rural environments. Our global community is urban, and the comfort, health, and security of most people is dependent on the organization and effectiveness of the structures of life in a city.

We all watched with great concern when COVID struck New York and we hardly knew how to control it within such a dense population center. Los Angeles considered requiring proof of vaccination for most indoor activities, including restaurants, sports events, schools, libraries, and banks.

I congratulate the Buddhist groups that put the safety of their followers first. It was brought home to me when the Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum had at great expense mounted a 3-D Virtual Reality exhibit of my Maritime Buddhism project. We were set to open it when the virus arrived and the exhibit was closed to the public for more than a year. A great disappointment for me, but an example of compassion on the part of the Museum that treasures life over exhibitions of treasures.

How can we comprehend hundreds of thousands of deaths, millions of infections, a large group of survivors who suffer long-term health problems and disabilities? What is the message of Illness, Old Age, and Death? Should we even allow ourselves to be burdened with such depressing data? Sakyamuni was shocked out of his complacency by what he witnessed in the crowds: sick people, old ones, and even dead ones. His first move was an attempt to understand what he saw. He asked his older attendant: are these things that happen in certain families? Are there people who are susceptible to these afflictions? The answer was “No, this is not limited to those who are weak, poor, marginal... It is a reality that affects every human.” One can hear Sakyamuni saying, “You mean this could happen to me? I am young and strong and wealthy, surely, I am immune to these unpleasant features that I see in the crowds.” Again, he is told, “No, you are not immune, it will happen to you in due course.” Suddenly, life looked very different to him. All the things which made him proud appeared as inconsequential since

none of it would last. He accepted the reality of what he saw and because he accepted it, he was able to go forward to his destiny.

COVID forced us to see that the problems of life had been with us but we didn't have to pay attention, or so we thought. Inequality, homelessness, lack of healthcare, inadequate basic research on our human condition, arose before us like the sights that greeted Sakyamuni during his daily drives through the city streets. Wealth inequality on the global scale is truly shocking. One percent (1%) of the world's population controls forty-six percent (46%) of the wealth and if we look at the top thirteen percent (13%) of the population, they control eighty-four percent (84%). For fifty-five percent (55%) of the world, more than half of its population has control of only one and three-tenths percent (1.3%) of the wealth. Do we wonder why the homeless are increasing or why many around the world cannot afford the cost of a vaccine for COVID? It is a very dangerous situation and one which will continue to challenge us as we try to establish our societies after the pandemic.

When we look at the changes that occurred during COVID, they show us how far apart our generations are growing. There is a disconnect between age groups that probably has never existed to this degree in our social and cultural life. You can see that Baby Boomers, now the senior generation, during the pandemic have changed very little in the way in which they receive information. But when we look at the two generations that followed the Baby Boomers, their grandchildren for example, change has been dramatic and significant. Recent research shows us major changes and the use of the world of internet contact and social media, expanding far beyond anything that was seen before the pandemic. Baby Boomers have continued to make use of the recognized media of radio and television and newspapers, while the younger generation found their information in a wide variety of digital sources.

It is also apparent that many of the online sites are less controlled by editing, review, or censorship. In the post-COVID world, Buddhism must dedicate more resources to these avenues that are being embraced by the younger audience. It will be a struggle for the senior group to adapt and respond to these massive shifts in generational activities. However, it is also an opportunity for a new generation of leaders to come forward and help to construct the future methods

of how Buddhist thought can be presented in the media. I have to say that I am encouraged by the responsiveness that I find among the young who use and understand the computer world. They want to be part of the world, to be seen, and to be heard. A window is open to this communication across the generations and I believe that every Buddhist group needs to reach out to these young people and ask for their help. We worry about how to include and interest the young generation in Buddhism. Now we have a situation where they are truly needed to help with the use of digital resources that make up their daily lives. It would be a great pity to lose this opportunity to include them and ask that they take a role in creating new and exciting projects that can reach far beyond a local audience.

We, like Sakyamuni, are faced with the question of what do we do now that we have experienced the COVID pandemic? If our thought is to return to the way things were before, we are destined to face disillusion. History of pandemics provides ample proof that there is change and we are challenged to live with that change. Our hope is to have control over the world and over life. As Woody Allen has noted, we live as if death is optional, and to this we can add, we hope to make old age and illness optional. If there is an option, then we are ashamed to have illness, grow old, or die.

There was a health guru on television. Each year he would prove his strength by tying himself to a barge and pulling it up a river. After he was over ninety, someone asked him about old age, illness, and death, and he replied that they would be an embarrassment to him after years of showing people that he could resist these things through exercise. Even with his powerful body and careful habits of living, he faced the Three Great Messengers just as Sakyamuni did. I, too, have grown old and with the problems of old age that have no cure, there came upon me a sense of defeat. In one way, I was ashamed of myself when I looked in the mirror and saw the white hair, the sagging muscles, and the wrinkled neck. The only solace I found for old age is when it dawned on me that this old age of mine, which was such a source of complaint and shame, is in fact the only thing standing between me and death. Seen in that light, it has become more of a friend rather than an enemy. How many things in life are actually optional? Is there an option to live without technology? Is there an option for my virus vulnerability? Is there an option to facing climate change?

If we go to a casino, is there an option to the cards we are given? The dealer will not give me a new hand because I do not want the one that has been dealt to me. My task is to be skillful with how I play out the limitations of my cards. We have been given a pandemic, it is the cards that life has dealt. I do not have the option of saying that I refuse the deal and want a new one. In the US, we have over 700,000 deaths from COVID and many of us are still trying to understand what that means. We have searched for many other options. We even try to deny that is happening. Next, we comfort ourselves by saying it will not happen to me. If I get it, I can cure it. My age and health entitle me to an easy time. And yet, in the background, there is the drumbeat that continues to count the dead and the specter of new variants.

How then can Buddhists relate to this time of so much illness and death? The Dalai Lama once said that compassion can only be experienced between equals. We are all vulnerable, all of us vulnerable to illness, old age and death; all of us to the Three Poisons of Greed, Hatred, and Delusion; all of us to fear, suspicion of others' motives, and worry about our own weaknesses and shortcomings. We are equals in the face of COVID, climate change, and social problems. When we realize this, we open the door to compassion and calm acceptance of the way things are, and the insights of what is possible. It can all seem overwhelming, and wisdom can be seen as a source of pain.

In the Jewish tradition, there are those who keep a spice box that is filled with fragrant sweet smells. When life seems too much, you can open the box, and the smell reminds you that there is hope; there is courage; there is joy in living. Buddhists have the practice of lighting incense. Sometimes, it is directed toward a ritual use, and we forget that the smell reminds us of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and the knowledge that we possess the basis for enlightenment, the



The fragrance of incense awakens our remembrance of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

basis for understanding that allows us to deal with a changing world, with illness, old age, and even death. We need the comfort that incense can give us. Years ago, I went to Bali and was invited to a dance ritual in which the performers went into trance. When the dancers appeared, they gathered in a group and one leader lit incense then passed it by each dancer. They had trained their minds to respond to the fragrance of the smoke and to immediately go into a trance state. Ever since then, I have had a recognition of the power and use of smell. So when you next light incense let it give you some assurance that there have been Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the past, and there are still those who can help and support us in times of crisis.

I know that much of what I have said seems to be distressing and a bit overwhelming. The Buddhist tradition continues century after century to tell the story of the Three Great Messengers that came to Sakyamuni. If one could ask him about that experience, would he say that he was sorry it ever happened, sorry that he saw Illness, Old Age, and Death? I think he would smile and assure us that it was one of the great and important moments in his life, that it started him on a journey which led to Enlightenment and finally Nirvana.

The Three Great Messengers are not sent to cause us pain. They are sent to say, here is the reality of life, and you have the power and the ability to deal with even these aspects of life. Once you hear the message, you can stop fearing life and learn to deal with these most basic issues. COVID has been a messenger and we have seen people respond, grow, and become stronger. People who were never tested to this degree, such as healthcare workers, have learned that they can be far stronger than they knew, that their compassion can help sustain them.

Scientists have been able to give us the great gift of vaccines in a remarkably short span of time. Who knew that our societies were strong enough to live through months of isolation, interruption of every aspect of our careers, our children's education, and the fear of illness or even death. We have done remarkably well given the nature of the pandemic.

Buddhism has also shown us that it is flexible and responsive to challenges, that it can function in a world of crisis. It has not collapsed or disappeared because of these hard times. Now that we are beginning to open up our world, I hope that we will not just hope to go back to normal. Rather, we will be like Sakyamuni,

taking new directions, striving for goals that we never had before, embracing life in all its aspects strengthened by our ability to hear the Three Great Messengers and possessed of the strength to live to the fullest.

### **3. Learning to Respond to the Human Condition**

We take one last trip with the young Sakyamuni as he drives his chariot through the city. Having received messages about illness, old age, and death during his outings, he must have been subdued and anxious about what he will see next. When the last Messenger does appear before him, it is a surprise. Instead of another painful reminder of the nature of the Human Condition, he sees a tranquil and focused person observing all that is passing by him. Sakyamuni is amazed to see such quiet contemplation, especially since he is in a disturbed and restless state of mind from his previous messages. Asking who this person is, Sakyamuni is at first disdainful. “How can someone sit so calmly when looking at the human condition?” We can imagine Sakyamuni’s thoughts as if they mirror our own. We are often like Sakyamuni, unable to accept a calm response to life’s challenges. We react to such calmness with accusations and dismissal. Doesn’t this Calm One know that health will give way to illness, youth to old age, and life to death? Is the Calm One deluded or mentally unbalanced? Surely no sane person can look at the Human Condition and not be in danger of falling into despair. We are sure that no one with any sense of reality can do anything but groan when faced with such knowledge. It is like seeing someone who is happy when we are sad; we want to go up to them and ask:

“Don’t you know what is going on in this world? Haven’t you seen the news, all the trouble spots around the world, all the sites of accidents, tornadoes, floods, bank failures, pandemics, climate change, crime, and gun violence? Being calm, aren’t you living in denial, shutting out reality, just living with delusion and illusory notions?”

With questions like these, it turns out that this Fourth Great Messenger may be the greatest challenge of all, much more difficult to understand than any of

the first three. When Sakyamuni looked at the person sitting in calm repose in the face of illness, old age, and death, his wonderment was understandable. How many of us feel that you can't get up in the morning and drive to work and deal with colleagues and difficult issues in some removed state of mind? Where and how can we have calmness in the bustle of lives that seem to have too little time for all the tasks that must be performed?

In one way, the idea of dealing with life in a calm manner seems impossible and we just abandon any attempt to do so. Instead, we project the idea that it is only doable in some special place like a monastery. I have often been told that my profession as a Professor has allowed me to live in such a place, an Ivory Tower, where calm study and deep thinking are possible. It saddens me to have to report as one who has lived for decades in universities, they are difficult places. There is just as much envy, jealousy, anger, and greed on campuses as in the "world." Even monks and nuns in monasteries live with disturbing problems when they encounter colleagues as well as followers. As the first three messengers told Sakyamuni, "No one escapes the trials, the pain, and the disappointments of the Human Condition. And yet, here we are with the Fourth Great Messenger sitting in calm repose. Is it possible that the message has value? Is there some way we can be calm and effective in our response to the Human Condition and find a way to do it in our normal way of living?"

Kobe Bryant, one of the greatest players in basketball history, revealed that when he was, as he put it, "in the zone" he was at his best as a player. The fans came to look for signs of this "zone" and delighted in seeing him do wonders on the court. No one shouted at him to get out of the "zone." While in the "zone," he described the experience of being in a state where there was no arena, no shouting fans, no basketball, no hoop, no scoring, there was just a sense of being at one with the whole environment. While he was in this state of mind, he seldom missed a shot or misdirected a pass. No one in the stands was yelling, "get with it," "try harder," "focus on the ball," "remember the play outline," "be aggressive," or "you're kidding me, you can't play professional basketball in a state of ease." Instead, the fans would start to chant encouragement, "in the zone, in the zone." They were very aware that "Kobe in the zone" was playing in an inspired and superior fashion.

How is it that we can accept this power of calmness on the basketball court, yet find it difficult to accept any kind of “zone” when dealing with the Human Condition? We have only to turn on television and see that what is newsworthy and acceptable for airing are problems, angers, dangers, and seldom a report that shows someone in the “zone” of calmness. Our choice of movies and television series show the highest ratings belonging to shows that deal with murder, robbery, drugs, illegal actions, large amounts of money... not much focus on solutions or people who live constructive lives. The questions when facing the Fourth Great Messenger are: How does one take the practices that lead to serenity and calm acceptance and make them work in everyday life? How can one hold onto the “zone” throughout an entire day? Kobe Bryant admitted that all too often his “zone” lasted for a short time and then he was back in the arena, pushing his body to excel, sweating, and worried about the outcome as well as playing at a lower level.

In the opening of the *Heart Sutra*, we do not find the Buddha, but rather the main figure before us is like the Fourth Messenger of Sakyamuni. It is Avalokitesvara, a Bodhisattva who is the messenger. The Sutra opens with him looking down and contemplating the Human Condition. When viewing all of the world before him, he has the insight that the aspects of experience are momentary, fleeting, empty of an enduring quality, they are not the way he had previously understood them to be. At the moment when he is aware, all of the aspects of experience are empty, he ceases to suffer.

Reaching this state of awareness is as demanding as Kobe Bryant entering into a “zone.” If we accept the idea that there is momentariness and constant change, how can we learn to live with that reality? The great problem that besets us is, we do not have the experience of our bodies and thoughts undergoing constant and complete change in a millisecond.

I am not sure anybody can experience a momentary change. It happens so rapidly that we have no way to have the



Comparing photographs across different ages reveals the changing nature of the body.

experience of “I just completely changed in this moment.” Our brain is not set up to give us this ability to spot the very moment of change. So how fast can I detect that I am changing? Even looking at pictures taken a month apart, I don’t always spot the change in my body. The reality of my changing body only takes on an experiential level when I compare pictures that are taken five or even ten years apart. When I line up driver licenses of the past, or passports, and look at the photos, it is obvious that major changes have occurred. I am able to detect change over long periods of time, but I find it impossible to experience that change right now in every moment of this talk. And at best, the ability to detect change is dependent on photographs. It is not my memory that I can call upon to remind me of change, it is photographs that convey the proof of change.

In other words, when it comes to experiencing change, I am pretty slow and dependent on external aids. It is not all bad news, the inability of our senses to have an experience of millisecond changes is a gift. It allows us to survive and not be overwhelmed with a flood of sensory data that would swamp us. The weather has become more extreme. There are repeated instances of floods that overflow riverbanks and levees. At the same time, there is a long and persistent drought for wide regions of the earth. In a somewhat similar fashion to the floods that have occurred, if we could have the experiences of changes happening to us every moment, the amount of data flowing into our brain would outstrip our ability to process it. We would be flooded with impressions. And so, my direct experience of change is operating at about the five-year speed aided by photography, it is certainly not second to second.

However, although my perception is slow, there is no way to deny that changes are taking place that fall below the level of immediate awareness. The Buddhists remind us that even if we operate in slow time, we need to be aware that change has quite another speed.

In Abhidharma texts, the commentators had noticed this problem. They listed four divisions of a momentary thought:

1. Origination when the thought arises
2. Endurance when the thought persists for a millisecond
3. Decay when the thought is finished
4. Dissolution when the thought is completely gone

This process occurs at a very rapid speed. For that reason, the momentary and ever-changing rise and fall of mental states are seen by the compilers of the Abhidharma to be beyond our thought process. We can't think that fast... and so, what appears to be a world made up of substance is in fact just a series of moments that rise and fall with speed beyond our ability to see and think about it. Our thoughts are just a continuum that is so fast that things appear to have substance. Just like a movie shows us discreet pictures but at a speed that allows us to perceive objects that move across the screen seeming to be enduring and unchanged over time. Moving pictures are just an example of something that we can perceive and in doing so, comprehend things that are outside the realm of our perception.

What is gained by having a time when we are calm? On one level it gives us the freedom to see that there are always options in our response to the Human Condition. If we believe there is only one way to respond to a problem, then we have given that response an essence, an existence that says, "This and only this." The Buddhist canons again and again point out the danger of believing in the fixed nature of anything. The response that I take to be the one and only one, is subject to conditions like all of existence. What works in one situation may be destructive in another. The Human Condition has endless variations and they cannot all be effectively managed with fixed solutions. It only has meaning if we can experience it. I have come to see that one cannot deal with the Human Condition through a detached and impersonal view. We are immersed in humanness and therefore, responding must be a very personal experience not a Third Person one. We can, like Kobe, seek to be in the "zone," living to our highest capacity.

Finally returning to the question of learning how to respond to the Human Condition, it seems that this is best accomplished with calmness and a sense of oneness. When Sakyamuni sees the Calm One, he notices to his great surprise and disbelief that the person has a faint smile on his lips. I like to think that a part of the response is a touch of humor.

