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\*MAKING THE MOST OF THIS LIFE\*  
by Sayagyi U Chit Tin

Upaniyati jivitam appam ayu,                   jarupanitassa na santi tana  
Etam bhayam marane pekkhamano               punnani kayiratha sukkhavahani. [1]

Yo 'dha kayena sannamo                        vacaya uda cetasa tam tassa  
Petassa sukhaya hoti                         yam jivamano pakarto punnam.

Life comes to an end; a lifetime is insignificant. There is no protection for one who arrives at old age. Seeing this fear of death, one should do meritorious actions leading to happiness.

Whoever restrains body, speech, and mind here (in this life), whoever while living performs a meritorious action, for that person there is happiness after death.

Anguttara-nikaya I 155

Adittasmim agarasmim yam niharati bhajanam  
Tam tassa hoti atthaya no ca yam tattha dayhati.  
Evam adipito loko jaraya maranena ca.  
Nihareth' eva danena, dinnam hoti sunihatam.[2]

Yo 'dha kayena sannamo                        vacaya uda cetasa tam tassa  
Petassa sukhaya hoti                         yam jivamano pakarto punnam.

Any vessel taken out of a burning house, that is useful to the one (who saves it), not what is burnt there. Even so, the world is ablaze with old age and death. One should take out through generosity; whatever is given, that is well taken out.

Whoever restrains body, speech, and mind here (in this life), whoever while living performs a meritorious action, for that person there is happiness after death.

Anguttara-nikaya I 156

The verses quoted above were spoken by the Buddha to brahmins who came to ask his advice. On two separate occasions, decrepit old brahmins who had attained the venerable age of a hundred and twenty years went to see the Buddha. Both the first pair and the second pair of brahmins made the same request. They pointed out how old they were and said that they had not done virtuous deeds or good deeds, they had not made themselves a refuge from the fearful. Then they asked the Buddha to instruct them and give them advice that would be beneficial for them and bring them happiness for a long time to come.

The Buddha did not reproach the Brahmins for waiting until they were so close to death before thinking of their future. While it is true that the best time to start to strive for true happiness is when we are young and healthy, they could not return to the past, and feelings of guilt would only have reinforced negative feelings. The Buddha simply confirmed that they were indeed very old. Then he told the first two brahmins that life comes to an end through old age, sickness, and death, so they should practise restraint of body, speech, and mind. In that way, they would have protection, a shelter, an island (of safety), a refuge, and support in a future life. And he concluded these instructions with the first set of stanzas given above.

For the other two brahmins, the Buddha pointed out that the world is burning with old age, sickness, and death. So they too should restrain themselves in body, speech, and mind in order to find a refuge in the next life. And he concluded his talk with the second set of stanzas given above.

When the old brahmins went to the Buddha, they addressed him as "friend Gotama," an indication that they were not his followers yet. Ashin Buddhaghosa says that when they announced themselves they said "We are brahmins" to make clear that they did not belong to the other three castes.[3] They were no doubt proud of their position in society. They were aware, however, that high social status would not be of help to them after they died. They had probably heard of the Buddha from other people and knew that he taught people how to find a refuge.

The Buddha always suited what he taught to the people who requested he teach them. He was able to see their potential and teach as much of his Doctrine as they were able to understand and put into practice. So we see that for these two pairs of brahmins, the Buddha talked of old age and death, the fear of death and how to act when faced with the approach of death. For the first two brahmins, he says that life leads on to old age and death. Ashin Buddhaghosa says it is like a cowherd leading a herd of cattle. Then the Buddha tells them that the fear of dying should motivate everyone to do meritorious deeds. This is summed up as consisting of restraint in physical, verbal, and mental actions. Ashin Buddhaghosa says this means the Buddha established the brahmins in the five precepts for the remainder of their lives.

For the other two brahmins, the Buddha emphasized the painful side of the conditioned world by pointing out how it is burning with old age and death. Ashin Buddhaghosa says this should be taken to stand for the eleven types of fire associated with the conditioned world. These fires were specified by the Buddha in the Fire Sermon.[4] Everything is burning, the Buddha said, with the fires of lust, hatred, and delusion, with the fires of birth, old age, and death, and with the fires of grief, sorrow, suffering, lamentation, and despair. For the brahmins, the Buddha stresses how it is important to be generous if we are to have future happiness.

On another occasion, a Deva came to the Buddha, who was at the Jetavana monastery, when the night was nearly over.[5] The Deva recited the first stanza quoted above, but the Buddha took up the stanza and changed the last line:

Upaniyati jivitam appam ayu,                    jarupanitassa na santi tana  
Etam bhayam marane pekkhamano lokamisam pajahe santipekkho.

Life comes to an end; a lifetime is insignificant. There is no protection for one who arrives at old age. Seeing this fear of death and having given up the lures of the world, one should be intent on tranquillity.

The Deva was no doubt able to aim higher than future lives in the higher realms, so the Buddha takes the teaching further here than he did for the brahmins. Ashin Buddhaghosa points out the deeper meaning in the words of the poem. In explaining the words "a lifetime is insignificant," he quotes the Buddha's words to a group of bhikkhus that a person who lives for a long time only lives a hundred years or a little longer.[6] But this is speaking of a lifetime in general terms. In the ultimate sense, Buddhaghosa points out, we only last for one mind moment.[7] Just as a chariot wheel touches the ground at only one point on its circumference when it rolls or stands still, the lifetime of a living being is only a single conscious moment. We can say a person existed during a past conscious moment, but not that he still exists or will exist in the future. We can say a person will live in a future conscious moment, but not that he existed in the past or exists in the present. We can say a person exists during the present conscious moment, but not that he existed in the past or will exist in the future.

Ashin Buddhaghosa goes on to say that the Deva could develop the //jhanas// in order to be reborn in one of the Brahma worlds. There, he could live for anywhere from one to sixty-four world cycles. But the Buddha's answer to the Deva points out that aspiring to that does not lead out from continued existence. The ultimate goal must be to give up the lures of the world in order to be intent on tranquillity -- the unceasing tranquillity named Nibbana.

The brahmins were no doubt not ready yet to work for the attainment of Nibbana for the Buddha gives them instructions on how to be reborn in the higher realms. The Deva, however, could aim for the tranquillity of Nibbana, so the Buddha encouraged him to aim higher.

Those of us who practise the development of insight are working for the highest goal of Nibbana. But not all of us will be able to attain it in this lifetime. It is therefore important that we do as many meritorious actions as possible so that in future lives we will be reborn in favourable conditions for continuing to practise the Buddha-Dhamma. If we are reborn in any of the lower worlds, it will be extremely difficult to escape from them. We can also learn a lesson here on how to encourage people around us. Not everyone we know will be inclined to practise true Buddhist meditation. But almost everyone accepts the importance of striving to lead moral lives and doing meritorious actions. We can encourage them in this, in hopes that in a future life they will be ready to strive for Nibbana.

Sayagyi U Chit Tin

FOOTNOTES:

[1] These lines are also found in S I 3, 54 (KS I 3f, 79.).

[2] These lines are also found in Ja III 471 [JS III 281, the last line in Ja is: nihareth' eva danena dinnam hi hoti nibhatam] and S I 31 (KS I 42).

[3] For his commentary on the verses, see Mp II 255f.; Spk I 22f., 255f.; and Ja III 471.

[4] Vin I 33f. (BD IV 45f.).

[5] S I 3 (KS I 3f.).

[6] S I 108 (KS I 135).

[7] The discussion on this point in the commentary is also found in Vism (Path), Chapter VIII, 39.

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