

Tissa with the Putrid Body

A young man from a noble family living in Srāvasthi (Sāvatti) heard the Buddha teach the Dharma and was so impressed that he decided to become a monk. After he was ordained, he became known as Venerable Tissa. After some time living at the monastery as a monk, a rash erupted all over his body. At first there were small pustules, pimples with pus, but as the disease progressed, they became the size of chickpeas, and eventually they became as large as fruits. Finally, they burst open and his body became covered with open sores. The infected sores began to smell bad, and consequently the monks called him Venerable Pūtigatta Tissa, which means Tissa with the Putrid Body. Over time, his bones became fragile and easily broken as they started to disintegrate. Walking was extremely difficult and he couldn't bathe himself or wash his clothes.

His upper and under robes were filthy and stained with dried blood. The other monks at the monastery didn't take care of him but instead abandoned him, and therefore he stayed in bed without anyone to protect him.

The Buddha was aware of this. The Buddhas always survey the world twice a day. At dawn, they survey the world looking with their divine vision through the extent of the galaxy towards the Perfumed Chamber (the Buddha's meditation hut), taking cognizance of all they see. In the evening, they survey the world looking from the Perfumed Chamber and taking cognizance of all that is outside of it. At this time, Venerable Tissa appeared within the Buddha's divine vision. The Buddha, knowing that the monk Tissa was ready to become an arahant, thought to himself,

"This monk has been abandoned by his associates; at the present time he has no other refuge than me."

So the Buddha left the Perfumed Chamber, and pretending to be making the rounds of the monastery, went to the fire room where the monastery's stove was always burning. He washed a large pot, filled it with water, set it on the stove, and waited for it to boil. When he knew it was hot, he went and took hold of the end of Venerable Tissa's bed.

The monks nearby said to the Buddha, "Please depart, reverend sir, we will carry him for you."

They carried the bed with Tissa laying in it to the fire room. The Buddha requested them to bring a container of hot water and take Tissa's upper robe and wash it thoroughly in hot water and lay it in the sun to dry. Then the Buddha moistened Tissa's body with hot water, and bathed him. At the end of his bath his upper robe was dry. The Buddha had the monks put on Tissa's clean upper robe and wash his lower robe in hot water and lay it in the sun to dry. As soon as the water had evaporated from Tissa's body, his lower robe was dry. Then Tissa put on one of the robes as an under garment and the other as an upper robe.

With his body refreshed and mind tranquil, he lay down again on the bed.

The Buddha stood at Tissa's pillow and said to him, "Monk, consciousness will depart from you, your body will become useless and, like a log, will lie on the ground." Then he said the following stanza:

Not long, alas, and it will lie—
This body here upon the earth,
Rejected, void of consciousness,
And useless as a rotten log.

Dhammapada 41

At the conclusion of the teaching, Venerable Tissa attained arahantship and reached Nirvana. The Buddha performed the funeral rites over his body, and taking the relics, caused a shrine to be built for the relics.

The monks at the monastery asked the Buddha, "Reverend sir, where was Venerable Tissa reborn?"

The Buddha replied, "He has reached final Nirvana, monks."

"Reverend sir," they asked, "how did it happen that such a monk, having the supporting tendencies to attain arahantship, came to have a diseased body? Why did his bones disintegrate? Through what deed in a former birth did he obtain the dispositions requisite for the attainment of arahantship?"

The Buddha responded, "Monks, all these happened solely because of deeds he committed in a previous existence."

The monks asked, "But, reverend sir, what did he do?"

The Buddha said, "Well then, monks, listen." And he told the following story of one of Tissa's past lives.

In the time of the previous Buddha, Buddha Kassapa (Kashyapa), Tissa was a bird hunter. He used to catch large numbers of birds and most of these he served to the king and other royalty. Most of those that he did not give to royalty he would sell. He was concerned that if he killed and kept the birds he didn't sell, they would rot. But if he didn't kill them, they would fly away. To prevent his captive birds from flying away, he would break their leg-bones and wing-bones and lay them aside, piling them in a heap. On the following day he would sell them. When he had too many, he would have some cooked also for himself.

One day, when flavorful food had been cooked for him, a monk who was an arahant stopped at the door of Tissa's house on an alms-round to receive food. When Tissa saw the monk, he made his mind serene and thought,

"I have killed and eaten many living creatures. A noble monk stands at my door, and an abundance of well-flavored food is in my house. I will therefore give him alms."

So, he took the monk's bowl and filled it with food, and bowed to the monk respectfully, saying,

"Reverend sir, may I obtain the highest fruit of the Dharma that you have seen."

The monk responded, "So be it."

Thus the Buddha completed the story of Tissa's past life. He explained, "Monks, it was through the meritorious deed Tissa then did that this result accrued to him. It was because he broke the bones of the birds that his body became diseased and his bones disintegrated. It was because he gave good food to the arahant that he attained arahantship."

Dharma Discussion - Illness:

The Buddha, instead of seeing Tissa as impaired by severe illness, saw that he was at his spiritual height, ripe for attaining enlightenment.

Indeed, this story illustrates that someone who is suffering the traumatic results of past negative karma is not a bad person, but on the contrary can be highly spiritually advanced. So, the Buddha went and cleaned Tissa, making him feel refreshed and relaxed, and he then became enlightened.

There are a few other stories of the Buddha or his monks visiting people who were very ill and putting them in a positive mental state by washing them, teaching the Dharma or extolling the virtues of the person. Some of the people recovered from illness, some were relieved of symptoms, and others attained a stage of enlightenment before passing away (Anguttara Nikaya 10.60 (Girimānanda); Samyutta Nikaya 55.26, 55.27 (Anathapindika)).

It is well-known that stress impairs health and healing, and that a positive mental state improves it. A meta-analysis of scientific studies has shown that "higher levels of emotional well-being are beneficial for recovery and survival in physically ill patients" and that "emotional well-being predicts long-term prognosis of physical illness." Sanne M.A. Lamers et al., J. Behav. Med. (Sept. 15, 2011).

The Buddha has given us many techniques for reducing stress and enhancing our emotional well-being.

However, when we're ill, the usual techniques of meditation and so forth may be difficult or impossible because our mind may be particularly scattered, foggy and unable to concentrate.

But there are plenty of ways that we can practice the Buddha's techniques even in the direst circumstances.

Indeed, it is in our moments of intense suffering that we desperately seek relief and well-being. And it's through our suffering that we can see ourselves in a deeper way than we ever did before.

To make the most out of our life during illness, we can consider illness as an asset to develop our mindfulness, process our emotions, enhance our capacity for lovingkindness and compassion, practice simple meditations, and deepen our understanding of Buddhist principles. And through this, we enhance our emotional well-being and our potential for healing.

Developing mindfulness and processing emotions

When we're sick, we often feel vulnerable, stressed and exhausted, which makes us more irritable, easily upset and likely to be short-tempered with others.

Emotions become more pronounced; deep emotions arise that we previously weren't aware of. So, we can use this opportunity to be more aware of our emotions, to be mindful of them. Rather than letting our mind be lost in endless loops of unpleasant thoughts, and perhaps guilt for having them, we mentally step back and make observations, acknowledging the emotions without judgment.

How do we do this exactly? Notice when you are feeling mentally uncomfortable. Observe your thoughts and determine who or what in particular is associated with these feelings—such as the future, your body, your partner, your child, a healthcare worker, studies, job, certain decisions. Next, label the emotion—such as fear about the treatment, anxiety about the future, feeling neglected when loved ones don't visit or call, annoyance or anger at others for not meeting your needs, guilt for burdening family, worry about job, finances or responsibilities, regret for neglecting your health, anger toward someone for being unfair or incompetent, jealousy or resentment toward a rival who is healthy, hating your body for being weak, or just hating being sick.

Be bold in observing and labeling your feelings; it's okay to not feel okay, to not be your healthy self. Try not to compound your stress with guilt or self-criticism.

When you have the energy, you can take the next step of exploring some reasons you might be having these emotions which might provide insight for processing them. If you like, you can write in a journal. With all the time you spend alone while ill, you have opportunities to really examine and process your emotions.

Ask yourself questions such as:

Am I flexible, or inflexible, about what may happen in the future in regard to certain things?

Am I comparing myself with other patients or other family members?

Are my feelings or expectations based on my particular upbringing or culture?

Is there a pattern of feeling neglected or unloved from childhood?

Do I tend to avoid asking for help, accepting help, or speaking up for my needs?

Does my anger remind me of a past event when I felt mistreated, neglected or ignored?

Does my disgust with my weakness remind me of past experiences of feeling weak in contexts other than illness?

Do I have a tendency toward self-criticism?

Do I have a hard time delegating responsibilities to others?

Do I often feel that I am treated unfairly?

If it were possible, would I really want to trade places with—to actually become—my rival?

What are the worst things about being sick: discomfort? being confined? missing activities?

Consider whether some of the emotions may arise from trauma in your past, such as from abuse or neglect by a parent, family member, partner, or cultural group.

In contemplating unpleasant emotions, think of the Buddha and his teachings to find ways to calm and heal them. Here are some ideas:

Regarding feeling guilt or hesitation about burdening others or asking for help, ask yourself, am I really being too self-centered or entitled, or am I afraid of being judged as needy? Think about the neglect of Tissa in the story. We don't know from the story why the monks didn't take care of him, but they suddenly were willing to help when the Buddha appeared. Remembering Tissa's predicament, be confident and don't hesitate to reasonably ask for help or accept help from others while you're ill. Consider that in willingly helping you, they are making merit for themselves.

If you feel disgusted toward your body for its weakness, try instead to think of your body as healthy and strong enough to conquer the illness. It's a precious human body, the vehicle for attaining wisdom and enlightenment, the ultimate happiness.

Perhaps your illness is a warning to pay more attention to your body and understand better what it needs, rather than neglecting it or taking it for granted.

Nurture your body like you would nurture an ill child, and appreciate how it has worked for you for all these years of life, carrying you through all your life experiences.

You also can appreciate the illness for helping you learn to accept your vulnerability and weaknesses, and release unhealthy perfectionism.

Instead of regretting severe illness, consider it to be a wake-up call to your spiritual journey, just as Prince Siddhartha, before he became the Buddha, heeded the wake-up call of seeing the famous four sights: the old man, ill man, dead man and renunciant.

Hating being sick means you're resisting the present circumstance, frustrated by not being able to change it or get rid of it, which makes you feel worse, increasing your stress.

Contemplate that everything changes, every moment is new, and that physical discomfort is part of being alive in a body, with bodily sensations that are always changing.

Each moment, each experience, arises from causes and conditions, as the Buddha teaches.

Instead of wishing time away, experience each moment it as is, exploring it with curiosity and mindfulness moment by moment, being fully absorbed in the present moment.

You might find it helpful sometimes to use humor to relieve stress. For example, if you feel guilty for being demanding, or if you feel angry or frustrated, transform it into comedy by exaggerating these feelings as you imagine a caricature of yourself, like a cartoon, shouting outrageous words at the top of your lungs. Then have a good laugh!

When you feel angry at a healthcare worker or caregiver who apparently caused unnecessary pain, made a mistake or neglected your needs, try to feel compassion for them by considering that they might be frustrated, stressed, exhausted or very sorry, even if they don't show it. Calming your anger helps you heal. Yet, you need to advocate for yourself too—explain your needs, concerns and sensitivities.

Enhance capacity for lovingkindness and compassion

Illness is a great opportunity to practice lovingkindness and compassion.

When we go to the hospital or for medical visits, we can imagine all the people there who are suffering with various ailments, who are in pain, afraid, alone, miserable or dying.

We can wish or pray that all the patients be healed, free from pain, peaceful and comforted.

We can generate lovingkindness and gratitude for the efforts of doctors, nurses and staff, and others who support and care for us.

If you are in pain, try to accept that there is pain and make it a Dharmic practice by thinking: may my pain purify the pain of all sentient beings.

When your pain is extreme, think: may no other beings experience pain like this; may my pain substitute for others' pain.

If you feel neglected, wish that all other patients in the world not feel neglected.

If you feel helpless, wish that all other patients in the world not feel helpless.

If you feel afraid, wish that all other patients in the world feel strong and not afraid.

If you feel isolated or alone, wish that all other patients have loving companions with them.

If you feel depressed, wish that all other patients feel well, happy and peaceful.

As you do so, visualize patients all over the world becoming peaceful—smiling, free of suffering.

You might wonder, isn't this just magical thinking? No. It's a method that not only as a practical matter reduces your own agony, but more importantly, develops your compassion and purifies your mind, bringing you closer to enlightenment—and freedom from all suffering.

The more you practice lovingkindness and compassion with genuine heartfelt wishes, the more peaceful you become and the more healing and uplifting your presence is to others.

Think about how one toxic person can fill room full of people with tension, and in contrast, how a deeply loving, compassionate person can fill a room full of people with peace and happiness.

Have you experienced a tranquil atmosphere around a great Dharma teacher? You can aspire to be a healing presence like the teacher, by doing these practices.

In addition, have compassion for yourself. If you are uncomfortable with visits, express your needs for rest and suggest that people text, or send photos or videos instead. Express your

needs to keep visits short. Use this as opportunity to practice being compassionately assertive—having compassion for yourself and others.

Simple meditations

When we're not feeling well, we can do very simple, short meditations to help ease our anxiety. Also, such meditations can help alleviate pain. Mindfulness meditation has been shown in a recent study to reduce pain, which is consistent with findings that pain is shaped by experiences, expectations, and cognitive-affective states. Gabriel Riegner, Fadel Zeidan, et al., *Biol. Psychiatry*, 97(1):81-88 (Jan. 1 2025), referenced in *National Geographic*, vol. 245 No. 6, p. 46 (June 2024).

Practice just a moment of mindfulness here and there throughout your day. You can establish routines of mindfulness, such as being mindful just before you eat, as you eat, as you drink a beverage, while you take medication, and as you walk to and from the toilet.

Experiment with practicing mindfulness as you enter sleep or when you are given anesthesia.

Just before a medical procedure, or when you feel nervous or anticipate pain, visualize the Buddha, a Mahayana/Vajrayana deity, or your spiritual teacher standing near you, smiling and reassuring you.

You can look at a small statue or a picture of them on your cellphone.

You can also mentally chant a mantra, Buddhist stanza or prayer.

To ease tension when you feel uncomfortable, take an imaginary mindful walk in nature.

You can even practice this together with another person guiding you.

Imagine you are at favorite place in nature (beach, forest, lake, mountain, meadow, etc.)

Close your eyes and imagine the scenery, and all the things you would see all around you.

Try to see them clearly in your mind as you survey the scene.

Next, imagine what you would hear (ex: birds, wind, waves, splashing, rustling, insects).

Imagine what you would smell (ex: ocean, sand, pine, earth, lake water, grass, flowers, wood).

Imagine what you would feel, the tactile sensations (ex: wind, sun on skin, ground underneath).

Next, imagine that you pick up something in your hand such as a leaf, shell, stone, or caterpillar.

Visualize it clearly and imagine how it feels in your hand and as you move it on your fingers.

Or, try this variation, contemplating the five elements at your favorite place in nature:

earth/solid (for example, soil, sand, stones, mountain, trees);

water/liquid (for example, ocean, mist, moisture in soil, humidity, dew, river);

fire (for example, warmth, sun, stars, sparkle, all that you can see because of light);

air/movement (for example, wind, breath, rustling, bubbles, seeds dispersing, birds flying);

space (for example, sky, spaciousness, horizon, cave, hollow tree).

Try a healing visualization with an image of a candle flame. You can gaze at a real one or a picture of one on your cellphone, and then close your eyes to see it clearly in your mind.

Then imagine that the candle flame slowly moves to your forehead, and then enters inside your brain, illuminating your whole brain with a glow of soft white light, soothing, calming and healing the whole brain.

Then imagine the flame slowly moves down into your throat, and then down into your heart, soothing, relaxing and healing along the way with its warm glow.

Let the warm glow fill your chest cavity including the lungs, soothing, relaxing and healing the whole chest area.

Then slowly move the flame into your abdomen, where the glow of white light soothes, relaxes and heals each organ of the abdomen, one organ or one part of the abdomen at a time.

Let the glow linger for more time on parts of the body that are affected by the illness.

Then visualize the flame moving slowly down and back up each limb, one at a time, soothing, relaxing and healing.

Finally, imagine the whole body is full of light, soothed, relaxed and healed.

Deepen understanding of Buddhist principles

In the story, the Buddha taught that harmful actions—negative karmas—in a past life caused Tissa’s severe illness.

Yet the Buddha also has taught that karma is not the cause of all illnesses, but that there are other causes, such as imbalances in the body, poor diet, overeating and weather.

We sometimes don’t know the cause of an illness, and in any event, we must try to improve our health and recover from illness through medical treatment, other modes of healing, and appropriate care because, as the Buddha taught, health is our highest gain; our precious human life, and a clear mind, are the means to attain enlightenment.

Although we take our medication which fights the harmful microbes, bacteria, and viruses, we can think of them as our karmic creditors who are now taking sustenance from us as a result of our past actions; we’re now feeding them what we owe them.

Rather than hating them, we witness the process of disease and healing.

If the illness is terminal or doesn’t respond to any treatment, then the illness likely is the ripening of karma—its underlying cause is our negative action from a past life.

Karma is not a curse; it’s a purification, a release of something negative that we have done.

So, think positive: the illness is purifying my obscurations, exhausting my negative karma, and therefore, it’s a big step forward on the spiritual path.

Some people dread death so much that they feel tortured while they live their last days, especially when they believe that they have only one life.

Buddhists understand that human life is precious, but it’s only one life of countless lives.

Long life is not the goal; it’s what you do with your life that is important. As the Buddha taught, “It is better to spend one day virtuous and meditative than to live a hundred years immoral and uncontrolled” (Dhammapada 110).

Illness can help us learn not to be too attached to the body.

When we're healthy, we enjoy its strength and youthfulness, which enables us to enjoy many activities and live independently. So, we have a degree of pride and attachment to our body. When we become seriously ill, that changes. We see its fragility, unreliability, impermanence. We see that we can't totally control the body—so then we understand more clearly that the body is not me, it's not who I am; the body is only a temporary vessel. Our pride in the body starts to diminish and we develop more humility.

When we're very ill, we might feel a lot of uncertainty—of diagnosis, treatment, prognosis, duration or severity of symptoms, life expectancy, changes in lifestyle, abilities or appearance. We see how things change, how they are impermanent.

And we see how things are dependent on so many factors; any one factor (an event, action, words, medication, mistake, kindness, assistance, visitor, roommate, etc.) affects countless other things. Contemplate that everything arises dependent on innumerable causes and conditions.

Also, we're more dependent on others while ill

These experiences give us a deeper understanding of the interdependence of all things.

We can contemplate that our body is composed of countless cells, gases, minerals, nutritive materials, waste materials, helpful and harmful microbes, and so forth, and now, disease.

Which particles are "me" and which are not "me"?

If we examine the body on a microscopic level, and then down to the subatomic level, where is the "I" among all this? Where is my "self"?

These insights can reduce our egoic individualism and lead us toward an understanding the Buddhist concept of no-self—that there is no unchanging, permanent self or essence in any phenomenon—which along with impermanence and suffering are the three characteristics of all existence.