

Lesson 32 – LIVING THE DHARMA – The Buddha Passes Away

When the Buddha was eighty years old, during the rainy season, he got very sick, with extremely severe pain. He was so ill that he could have died, which, for a buddha, means that he would pass into final nirvana, the ultimate peace, never to be reborn. He remained mindful and fully aware, without complaining about the pain. He thought,

“It is not right for me to pass away into nirvana without telling my attendants and the Sangha of monks.”

So, he made the illness disappear and he recovered. Venerable Ananda—his main assistant, his attendant, the monk who was usually close by his side in his later years—was very relieved to see that he looked healthier. He said,

“I’m used to seeing you comfortable and healthy, Lord. When you were sick, I felt tense, I couldn’t see straight, my thoughts were all unclear. But I knew that you would not pass away into nirvana without an announcement to the monks.”

The Buddha replied, “Ananda, what does the Sangha expect from me? The Dharma I have taught has no secret and public versions; I haven’t kept anything secret. Now I am old, Ananda, I am eighty years old. Just as an old cart is made to continue on by patching it up, so too it seems to me that my body is made to continue on with the need to patch it up. It is only comfortable by not paying attention to the symptoms and by stopping the feeling in the body. So, Ananda, each of you should make the Dharma your only refuge, by being mindful, fully aware, and getting rid of craving for things in the world.”

One morning, the Buddha asked Venerable Ananda bring his mat and come with him. When they sat down, the Buddha said,

“When anyone has developed, established, and properly carried out the four bases of success, he could, if he wished, live out the age or what remains of the age. Ananda, I have done all that; I could, if I wished, live out the age or what remains of the age.”

This was a hint to Venerable Ananda to ask the Buddha to live much longer, but Venerable Ananda didn’t understand it and didn’t get the hint. His mind was distracted and confused by Mara, the evil spirit. The Buddha repeated his hint two times, but Venerable Ananda still didn’t get it. The Buddha said,

“You may go, Ananda, now it is time to do as you like.”

Ananda bowed and went away to sit at the root of a nearby tree. Meanwhile, Mara the evil spirit came to the Buddha and said, “Attain final nirvana now. Now is the time for you to attain final nirvana. You once said, ‘I will not attain nirvana, Evil One, until the monks, nuns, and men and women followers are wise,

disciplined, perfectly confident, and educated to learn the Dharma properly, practice the Dharma the true way, and teach and explain the Dharma.’ But now all that has been accomplished. Also, you said, ‘I will not attain final nirvana, Evil One, until this holy life has become successful, widespread, and shared among many, until people make it a good example to others.’ But now all that has been accomplished. So, attain final nirvana now.” He hoped the Buddha would have less influence over people if he passed into final nirvana.

The Buddha said, “You may rest, Evil One. Soon my attainment of final nirvana will take place. Three months from now I will attain final nirvana.”

With those words, the Buddha gave up his will to live and revealed that his body would die and he would attain final nirvana, the ultimate goal. Just then, a huge, frightening earthquake occurred.

Venerable Ananda asked the Buddha why there was such a big earthquake. The Buddha explained that there are several reasons. One is the natural cause, when great forces make water quake which makes the earth quake. Another is when a powerful being in a heaven-world, or a monk or holy man with supernatural powers makes the earth quake. Other great earthquakes occur at very special moments in a Buddha’s life, such as his birth, full enlightenment, first teaching of the Dharma, giving up the will to live, and passing into final nirvana.

Then he said, “And now, Ananda, this very day I have given up my will to live.”

Ananda pleaded, “Lord, live out the age, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare and happiness of the beings of the heaven-worlds and humans.”

The Buddha replied, “No, Ananda, don’t ask me that now. The time to ask that has now passed.”

Venerable Ananda asked two more times, and on the third request, the Buddha asked why he asked for a third time. Venerable Ananda repeated what the Buddha had said earlier about living longer. The Buddha told him that if he had begged him to live out the age when he gave him the big hint, he would have agreed to live longer. So, he said that Venerable Ananda was at fault for failing, when given such a big hint, to ask him to live longer. Venerable Ananda, who had an amazing ability to focus on and remember all the Buddha’s teachings, had let his mind be distracted when something so important was being told to him.

The Buddha said, “Haven’t I already told you, Ananda, that there is separation from all that is dear, all that is loved? How can it be that something that is born, that has come into existence, doesn’t die? That’s not possible. Something has been given up by me: my will to live. I have said that three months from now I will attain final nirvana. It’s impossible for me to go back on those words.”

He had told Mara that he would pass into final nirvana in three months.

He requested Venerable Ananda to call all of the monks in the monastery. When they were gathered together, the Buddha told them,

“Monks, I have now taught you the things which I know directly. These things you should thoroughly learn, develop and constantly practice so this holy life (the Sangha of Buddhist monks) will last long, and, with compassion for the world, for the welfare and happiness of many people and heavenly beings. Monks, all things must pass away. Attain perfection through diligence. Soon I will attain final nirvana. I am old and little life remains in me; I will soon leave you. Be diligent and mindful, be virtuous, monks. With thoughts well concentrated keep watch over your hearts. Whoever lives diligently this Dharma will leave the cycle of rebirths and all suffering will come to an end.”

The Buddha traveled around with large groups of monks to many different towns to teach for the last time. In one town lived Cunda, the son of a goldsmith, who offered the Buddha and his monks a mango tree grove to camp in, and a meal. Cunda had various foods prepared at his house for the offering, including pig’s mincemeat, which is either pork or a type of mushroom that pigs eat. When Cunda went to the Buddha to invite him and the monks for the meal, the Buddha said:

“Serve the pig’s mincemeat you have prepared to me, Cunda. But serve any other food you have prepared to the Sangha of monks.”

Later, after the meal was served, the Buddha told him, “Cunda, if any pig’s mincemeat is left over, bury it in a hole. I don’t see anyone other than me who could digest it if he ate it.”

After eating his meal and giving Cunda a talk on the Dharma, the Buddha was attacked by a severe illness with bleeding and extreme pain, caused by eating the pig’s mincemeat. He endured the pain mindfully, without complaining.

He then went with Venerable Ananda toward the small town of Kusinara. On the way, the Buddha told him that late that night, between two sala trees near Kusinara, he will attain final nirvana. Concerned that someone may blame Cunda for his death after eating Cunda’s food, the Buddha told Ananda to tell Cunda that it was a great merit for him that the Buddha attained nirvana after getting the last meal from him, and therefore that Cunda will have a long life, good position, happiness, fame and rebirth in a heaven-world.

When they arrived near Kusinara, the Buddha said, “Ananda, please make a couch ready for me with its head toward the north between these two sala trees. I am tired and will lie down.”

After Venerable Ananda prepared the couch, the Buddha mindfully lay down on his right side with his head propped up by his right hand, and one foot on top of

the other. The trees, which normally would not be in bloom at that time, were full of blossoms, sprinkling petals down onto the Buddha's body.

The Buddha said, "Ananda, the two sala trees are covered with blossoms although it is not in season. They sprinkle them on my body out of devotion. But this is not how a Buddha is honored, revered or respected. Rather, it is the monk or nun, or man or woman follower who lives according to the Dharma, practices the Dharma, that honors, reveres or respects a Buddha with the highest devotion of all. Therefore, Ananda, practice this way: 'We will live according to the Dharma, practicing the Dharma.'"

Venerable Ananda asked and the Buddha answered several questions. Then Venerable Ananda, who had not yet completed the goal of becoming an arahant, walked away. He went inside a building, stood leaning against the door frame and wept, saying, "I am still only a learner whose work is not yet completed. My teacher is about to attain final nirvana—my teacher who has compassion for me!"

The Buddha asked the monks, "Where is Ananda?"

The monks told him where he was and what he had said. The Buddha told a monk to bring Ananda, and said to him,

"Ananda, don't be sad. Haven't I already told you that there is separation from all that is dear and all that you love? How can it be that something that is born, that has come into existence, should not die? That is not possible. Ananda, you have over a long time constantly attended to my needs with acts of loving-kindness—helpfully, gladly, sincerely and without hesitation. You have made merit, Ananda. Keep on making effort and you will soon be free from all impurities." That meant that soon Venerable Ananda would become an arahant.

Then he said, "Monks, the buddhas of the past also had attendants like Ananda, and those in the future will have attendants like him, too. Ananda is wise, monks. He knows when is the time for monks to come and see me, and when is the time for nuns to see me, and for male followers to see me, for women followers to see me, and for kings and ministers to see me. When any groups of monks, nuns, men or women come to see Ananda, they are glad to hear him speak, and disappointed when he is silent again."

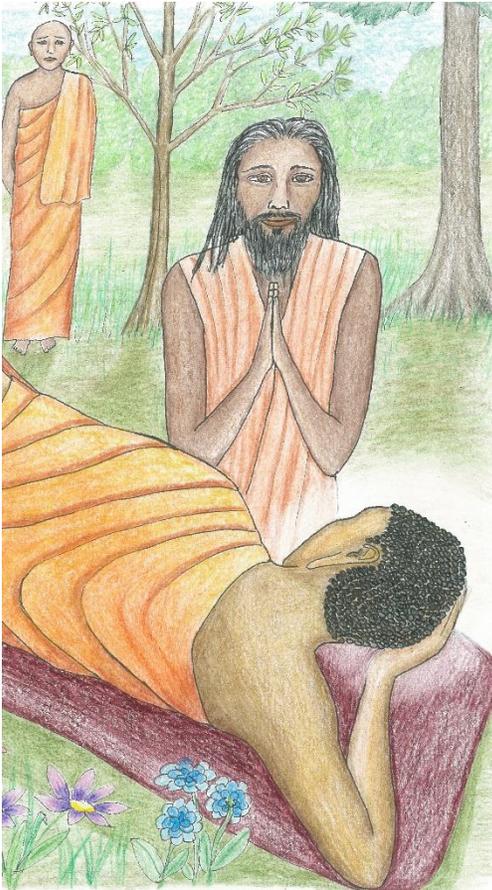
After those kind words of praise for Venerable Ananda, the Buddha told him to go into town and announce that the Buddha will pass into final nirvana that night. When the announcement was made, the people of the town were overcome with grief, and went immediately to visit the Buddha.

A wandering ascetic named Subhadda heard that the Buddha would attain final nirvana that night. He had heard that there were fully enlightened people in the world occasionally, and wondered whether the Buddha was one of them.

He wanted to hear the Buddha teach so he could be sure the Buddha was fully enlightened. He approached Venerable Ananda and asked to see the Buddha.

Venerable Ananda replied, “Friend Subhadda, don’t trouble the Buddha. He is tired.”

The Buddha overheard their conversation and told Ananda not to keep him out, to let him come. Even in his last moments, the Buddha wanted to help others.



Subaddha approached the Buddha and asked a question. The Buddha’s answer made Subaddha’s doubts disappear. He then took refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, and requested to be ordained as a monk. The Buddha told Venerable Ananda to ordain him into the Sangha. Subaddha later became an arahant.

The Buddha asked the monks whether they had any questions. None of them had any. The Buddha last words were:

“Indeed, monks, I say this to you: it is the nature of all things to dissolve. Attain perfection by diligence.”

He went into meditation, deeper and deeper, and then a great earthquake occurred, signaling the moment that he attained final nirvana, the ultimate, endless peace and happiness that is so profound it cannot be described in words.

Questions:

1. Why did the Buddha make his earlier illness disappear? (he didn’t want to pass away without first telling the monks)
2. Why didn’t Venerable Ananda ask the Buddha to live longer when the Buddha first hinted to him? (his mind was confused and distracted)
3. To whom did the Buddha first say that he would pass into final nirvana in three months? (Mara)
4. Did Cunda create good karma or bad karma for giving the Buddha food that made him sick? (good karma)

5. What is the best way to honor the Buddha, by offering flowers? (no, by living according to the Dharma, practicing the Dharma)

6. Why did the Buddha allow Subaddha to see him even in the last moments of life? (even in his last moments he wanted to help others)

What the Buddha said:

“Uttitṭhe nappamajjeyya, dhammaṃ sucariṭaṃ care, dhammacāri sukhaṃ seti, asmim loke paramhi ca.”

“Wake up! Be diligent! Lead a righteous life. He who lives practicing the Dharma lives happily both in this world and the next.”

Dhammapada 168 (13:2)

Dharma Discussion – Living the Dharma:

The Buddha lived his life constantly helping others, because of his great compassion for their suffering.

He traveled all over—by walking—to different towns and villages, even when he was ill, so he could teach the Dharma to as many people as possible who were ready to learn it.

When he was extremely ill, about to die, what did he do to help Venerable Ananda, Cunda and Subaddha? He showed great compassion for them by speaking kind words that would help them.

And he instructed everyone—not just monks but everyone—to live according to the Dharma, practicing the Dharma, and to be diligent in learning and practicing the Dharma. This was so important that they were his last words.

Yet, many people in modern times feel that religion is unimportant, because their life seems good enough and they don't believe religion will really improve it.

But is it good enough?

Every day, we're always doing what we have to do to avoid problems and things that would be unpleasant or make us feel uncomfortable or stressed.

And we worry about protecting or losing things.

Every day we experience not getting what we want, things not going our way.

What do people usually feel when they don't get what they want, or when they get what they have been trying to avoid, such as being rejected by a friend?

They feel disappointed, agitated, extremely upset or even depressed.

Isn't this just the way life is? Yes. We're used to this; it's normal.

We might not notice every time we're agitated, frustrated, disappointed or worried, because we experience it so often in everyday life.

But, what happens over time, over several years, if we often feel this way?

It can lead to ongoing stress, depression, anxiety and illness.

We don't have to be so stressed.

The Buddha's teachings can make us much happier and more peaceful.

How do we know this? We can see this in people who are dedicated to the Dharma, who practice it sincerely, diligently—we see that they are more confident and calm even when they experience difficulties, compared to those who don't practice the Dharma.

What does it mean to be diligent? To make ongoing efforts—to keep trying—to do something with interest and attention.

How do we live according to the Dharma, practicing the Dharma with diligence?

And why should we think about doing that when we are young?

Because we form our character, and our good habits and bad habits, when we are kids, and bad habits are very difficult to change when we're older.

But we are so busy! When our mind is filled with so many things we have to do, we don't often think of the Dharma

Many of us don't have time to sit and meditate or read Dharma books.

Venerable Ananda also was very busy attending to the Buddha, and he didn't have much time to meditate.

He was so busy doing things such as giving messages to and from the Buddha, advising and dealing with the many people who wanted to visit the Buddha, doing errands, bringing water to the Buddha, and cleaning his apartment.

But he practiced the Dharma with diligence by doing whatever he could to be helpful to others wherever he was.

When he cried about the passing away of the Buddha, he had doubts about whether he was practicing the Dharma enough, because he wasn't like the other monks who spent a lot of time meditating and who had become arahants.

But the Buddha assured him and gave him confidence that he was practicing the Dharma by the everyday things he was doing, including being helpful to others.

And he later did become an arahant.

We too can practice the Dharma by the everyday things we do, whether in school, at home, with friends, or alone.

One way to do this is by remembering the Noble Eightfold Path, or at least some parts of it, and applying it to our daily life by asking ourselves some questions.

For example, for Right View, we can remember the Four Noble Truths, or at least the first one—that life is full of suffering.

We can ask ourselves, did I see someone suffering today? And did I feel compassion for the person who was suffering?

Maybe we saw someone who is ill, a brother or sister who was upset, someone struggling to do their classwork, or someone being teased or bullied.

For Right Intention, we can ask ourselves, did I have the right intention when helping someone—did I do it with lovingkindness or compassion, because I really care about the person I'm helping, or because I felt that I was supposed to do it?

For Right Speech, we can ask ourselves, did I speak any kind words to someone today? Did I speak any angry words today? Did I say anything dishonest today?

For Right Action, we can ask ourselves, did I do anything that may have hurt or harmed any person or other living creature today? Did I take anything that wasn't mine?

For Right Livelihood, we can ask ourselves, did I do all my schoolwork and/or homework well today?

For Right Effort, we can ask ourselves, did I make efforts to say prayers, meditate, or help others? Was I tempted to be lazy, to watch too much television, computer games, or videogames?

For Right Mindfulness, we can ask ourselves, did I take a moment of mindfulness today? We can take a moment of mindfulness by closing our eyes for a moment, and just being aware of everything that we hear and everything that we feel in or on our body. For example, we feel our eyelids on our eyes, our tongue against our teeth, our shirt on our shoulders and back, our belly moving as we breathe, our toes touching each other. This moment of mindfulness can help us feel calm and centered.

For Right Concentration, we can ask ourselves, did I practice a moment of meditative concentration today? We can do that by focusing on one object. We can look carefully at one small simple object—for example, a pebble or a candle flame—keeping our mind focused on it, memorizing its colors, shape, size, and other features; then, we close our eyes and try to visualize it. Or, we can close our eyes and focus on our breath, by taking three long, deep breaths, and just keep our mind focused on our breathing. This also can help us feel relaxed and learn to practice meditation on breathing.

By asking ourselves these questions, and doing these moments of meditation, we become aware of how we are practicing the Dharma every day, even when we are very busy!

Activity - Noble Eightfold Path Checklist:

List on a sheet of paper the eight parts of the Noble Eightfold Path. Next to each of the eight parts, write at least one question, such as the Eight-Fold Path questions above. Then at the end of the day, ask yourself the questions on your list to see how you practiced the Dharma that day.