

BASED ON THE TALK

What Are Humans Doing?

Edited by

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How would you answer this question?

Think about it. This is a question worthy of reflection. We are born into this world as humans. We live for a brief period as humans. Then one day we die, discarding our human form. At best, our passage from birth to death is fleeting. Time is limited. So, what exactly are we humans doing with our lives during this brief journey?

This question is easy to ask, but not easy to answer. People from all walks of life strive for wealth, fame, public praise, for admiration, honor and position. They crave these conventional goals largely because their attainment symbolizes worldly achievement. Those who have earned or inherited wealth or fame are singled out as successful and influential. They are admired because their chosen way of life is well-known and acceptable. Sharing worldly goals that are 'validated by consensus,' they preserve the mundane social order. Life for them appears safe, secure, and knowable. However, this way of life only binds them

to craving and clinging and reinforces the existing status-quo. There are those others, however, who diligently strive to make an end of craving and clinging. Swimming against the tide of popular opinion, these are people who are not warmly embraced by the world-at-large – or sometimes even by their own families. Society wonders why anyone in their right mind would willingly choose to swim against the stream of popular opinion.

Change threatens the status quo. It can feel like an abandonment to those 'left behind.' Relatives really don't want their loved ones to change. When people think they know what to expect from one another, they feel comfortable. They want things to remain just as they were.

For those whose level of understanding is limited to what they can know and see with their physical senses, it is difficult to recognize or accept profound transformation in others. Such people think that their friends or loved ones have lost touch with reason. Why else would they abandon their old familiar ways? The whole process confuses and threatens them. It's not hard to imagine their distress over this.

Human beings are born with craving, live with craving and most of us die with craving. That is why our Buddha said: "Craving leads the world." We plan our activities and pursuits around craving. We promote and defend craving. And, many of us try our best to dissuade others who desire to put an end to craving from even trying to do so. Craving is a prescription for suffering.

It begs the question: What are humans doing? What are we really doing? Because I wanted to know the answer to this question, I gave it a great deal of thought. The

right answer, however, isn't obvious and it didn't come easily.

Clearly, we have more to do in life than simply make a living. As important as food, clothing, shelter and money are for human security and well being, by themselves they don't give real meaning or purpose to our lives.

I realized that the purpose of human existence was not the accumulation of wealth or fame. Nor do we live only for the mere acquisition of public praise, admiration, worldly position or advanced academic degrees after our names. Reason dictates that there is more to life than this, much, much more. Although I thought I understood this, when I first thought about it I did not truthfully know what to do or what needed to be done. Eventually I learned that when we finally know what we are doing, we begin to know what we need to do.

Like so many others, I tried in vain to find purpose and attainment through education, though I soon discovered its limitations and boundaries. So, finally, seeking the answer I longed for, I turned to the teachings of the omniscient Buddha whose knowledge is unlimited and without boundaries. When I did, I truly came to know and see what we humans are doing and what else we need to do.

Let us look into two important questions:

1. What are we doing?
2. What else do we need to do?

These two questions are the subject of tonight's talk which is based on selections from the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the Aṅguttara Nikāya, the Dhammapada, the Abhidhammā

and commentaries.

My duty as a monk is to pass on, to the best of my ability, the true Dhamma of the Lord Buddha which is beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle and beautiful in the end. With this intention, let me begin with the first question: "What are humans doing?" When I ask this question of different people I get different answers. Their answers, of course, depend on their personal likes and dislikes. However, I usually hear some variation on the general theme of being committed to achieving material success, status and security in the world. This deeply-seated desire sets the course of their lives. To that end, most people want enough education or training to prepare them to compete for good jobs. With good jobs they hope to earn a lot of money, increase their wealth and improve their standing in the community. They think that this as a logical way to get ahead in the world and believe that happiness is found in worldly success.

I am a human being like you, a citizen of the human world. I really wanted to know what we are doing here and, more specifically, what I should do and why.

These simple questions are profound. For the correct answer to this question a Buddha had to arise in the world. And even though our Buddha long ago took his final Nibbāna, his teachings have been preserved and handed down over the past 2500 years from one generation of monks to another – first orally, then later in writing.

Happily, the Buddha's teachings remain unadulterated even to this day. They have been meticulously recorded and preserved and can be studied through reading books. Some of the suttas are easily understood. Others are more

difficult to comprehend. In such cases the role of bhikkhus, who can present the facts by relating one sutta to another, obviously becomes important.

My first reference in tonight's talk comes from the Devatā Saü yutta in the Sagāthā Vagga Saü yutta. The title of the sutta is *Oghatarana*, which means crossing (*tarana*) – the flood (*ogha*).

“On one occasion the Blessed One was staying at Sāvatti in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park. Then, when the night had advanced, a certain devata of stunning beauty, illuminating the entire Jeta's Grove, approached the Blessed One. Having approached, he paid homage to the Blessed One, stood to one side, and said to him:

“How, dear sir, did you cross the flood?”

“By not stopping and by not struggling, I crossed the flood difficult to cross.”

Let us examine the attitude of the deva mentioned in the commentary. This thought appeared in the mind of the deva: “I know the Buddha has crossed the flood and what the floods are, but I do not know how he crossed. If he just tells me how he crossed, I will quickly understand.” The deva was rather proud of himself.

The Buddha, Knower of all, the One who knows the right time, the right person, the right place and the right way to speak, could see the pride in the deva. Knowing this, the Buddha intentionally gave him an obscure, difficult to understand reply. The Buddha knew that the deva needed to be humbled, that he was stiff with conceit yet imagined himself wise. Realizing that the deva would not be able to penetrate the teaching unless he first changed

his attitude, the Buddha purposefully intended to confuse him in order to cut through his pride. This is real love and shows us the deep compassion of the Buddha. When the deva heard the Buddha's answer he felt uneasy, and, being unable to perceive its meaning he was humbled. He then asked the Buddha another question.

“But how is it, dear sir, that by not stopping and by not struggling you crossed the flood difficult to cross.”

The Buddha replied: “When I came to a standstill, I sank. When I struggled, I was swept away. It is in this way, friend, that by not stopping and by not struggling, I crossed the flood difficult to cross.”

Upon hearing this answer the deva penetrated the Buddha's meaning and, at that moment, he became a Sotāpanna.

Although almost all the suttas that appear in the Devatā Saü yutta of the Sagāthā Vagga Saü yutta are brief, the devas and brahmas who's minds are sharp can break through to the true meaning and directly experience the teaching at the end. We humans, however, still have difficulty understanding the deeper meaning of these suttas – even after we read and study them. Those who have knowledge of the Abhidhammā know what the floods are, but others do not.

When I started reading this sutta, I did not understand the meaning. It was only after reading the commentary explanation that I came to understand it, though it was still only intellectual understanding, not direct realization. To figure out what the sutta is saying is difficult

enough, but to directly penetrate its meaning is another matter all together.

In an attempt to help you know what we humans are doing and what else we need to do, I would like to share with you the profound meaning of this sutta.

The first question of the deva is: “How did you cross the flood?”

Here we need to know what the floods are. There are four floods. These four appear in the Abhidhammā. They are:

- (i) the flood of sensuality (*kāmogha*)
- (ii) the flood of becoming (*bhavogha*)
- (iii) the flood of wrong views (*ditthogha*)
- (iv) the flood of ignorance (*avijjogha*)

Ogha means flood;

Just as the great floods of nature sweep men and animals into the sea, so also these four floods sweep beings into the great ocean of the rounds of rebirth (*saii sāra*).

Let me explain the first one:

(i) the flood of sensuality (kāmogha)

It is the desire and lust for the five cords of sensual pleasure: visible objects, sound objects, smell objects, taste objects and tangible objects. Because of these, beings are subject to rebirth in the sensual realms: the human realm, deva realms and the four miserable realms.

Humans continually chase after sensual pleasures, trying to possess sensual objects. We are irresistibly drawn to them and are constantly busy and preoccupied in our

pursuit of beautiful objects, sounds, smells, tastes and touches. Our desire for them is nothing short of lust. We believe that we can’t live without them. For many of us, satisfying our sensual longings becomes the central purpose of our lives.

In the time of the Buddha there were five kings headed by King Pasenadi of Kosala. These five kings were absolutely enjoying themselves with the five cords of sensual pleasure when a question occurred to them: “What is the chief of all sensual pleasures?”

Some among them said: “Forms are the chief of sensual pleasures.” Some said: “Sound is chief.” Some said: “Odors are chief.” Some said: “Tastes are chief.” And some said: “Tangible objects are chief.”

Since those kings were unable to convince one another, King Pasenadi of Kosala said to them: “Come, dear sirs, let us approach the Blessed One and question him about this matter. As the Blessed One answers us, so we should remember it.”

“All right, dear sir,” Those kings replied. Then those five kings, headed by King Pasenadi, approached the Blessed One, paid homage to him, and sat down to one side. Once they were seated King Pasenadi recounted their entire discussion to the Blessed One, asking: “What now, Venerable Sir, is the chief of sensual pleasures?”

“Great king, I say that what is chief among the five cords of sensual pleasure is determined by whatever is most agreeable. Those same forms that are agreeable to one person, great king, are disagreeable to another. When one is pleased and completely satisfied with certain forms, then one does not yearn for any other form higher or more

sublime than those forms. For him those forms are then supreme; for him those forms are unsurpassed.”

The Buddha explained in the same way for the other objects.

We can imagine that those kings enjoyed every kind of sensual pleasure, but what they really wanted to know was which sensual pleasure is the chief of all.

People of every age immerse themselves in sensual pleasures. Why do people want wealth, fame, and status? It is because of desire and lust for sensuality. They believe that with wealth and power they will have secure and happy lives and be able to satisfy all their desires.

From the worldly point of view, we see most of mankind living and dying in the grip of their desires and lust for sensuality. They are swept away in the flood of sensuality. They are being sunk in it. It becomes difficult for them to cross.

(ii) the flood of becoming (bhavogha)

It is the desire and lust for rūpa-brahma (form-sphere becoming) and arūpa-brahma (formless-sphere becoming) and it is also the attachment to jhāna (absorption concentration) which can lead to rebirth in the Brahma worlds.

Here at Pa-Auk Forest Monastery, many meditators are developing concentration through Mindfulness of Breathing. When they have developed concentration through Mindfulness of Breathing, they can eventually enter absorption concentration which is very profound. Meditators who have attained this level of concentration experience progressively deeper stages of concentration known as first, second, third and fourth jhānas.

According to the Buddha, one who is concentrated knows and sees things as they really are. So, after developing this powerful absorption concentration up to the fourth jhāna, meditators are given instructions in the practice of Four Elements meditation, so they can know and see ultimate materiality as it really is.

When meditators can systematically discern the four elements that compose the body, concentration improves and the body begins to emit light. With continued practice, this light (which is often first seen as grey) begins to change from grey to white. Eventually, it becomes brighter and brighter until the entire body is seen as a block of bright light. In due course this perception breaks down into very tiny, minuscule particles, called rūpa-kalāpas. With continued practice meditators see 8, 9 and 10 types of materiality within each rūpa kalāpa. These 8, 9 and 10 types of materiality are the ultimate materiality of the physical body.

Once meditators are able to discern the four elements internally up to their ultimate reality, they then go on to discern the four elements externally. They see all external animate and inanimate objects as rūpa-kalāpas, arising and perishing very rapidly. At this point, they no longer see men, women, trees or other conventional forms but, rather, they see only rūpa-kalāpas rapidly arising and perishing. They are then seeing materiality as it really is, as taught by the Buddha.

Next, meditators move on to the analysis of ultimate mentality. With this practice they actually come to know and see the mental process as it arises and passes away in a series of mind moments, with consciousness and its as-

sociated mental factors present in each moment. This happens very rapidly.

When meditators know and see ultimate materiality and mentality, as they really are, rapidly arising and perishing, they frequently report that life is really suffering. They say, “We don’t want any more existences.” I sometimes ask them, if they can’t make an end of suffering in their present life, where they want to be reborn? They respond that they want to be born in the brahma world. They believe that life in the brahma realm will bring them release from a great deal of suffering because rūpa-brahmas (form-sphere brahmas) have only eye and ear-sensitivities but no nose-sensitivity, tongue-sensitivity or body-sensitivity. This means that they are released from the desire and lust for odors, tastes and touches. Contrast that to how hungry we humans are for these sensual pleasures.

Those wise meditators who have a sense of urgency become aware of the problems inherent in having these sensitivities. Suppose that a meditator has practiced mastery of first jhāna concentration in order to enter the first jhāna at will. If he can enter the first jhāna at the near death moment, he will be born in the first jhāna brahma world.

The flood of becoming is the attachment to life in the Brahma world and to jhāna concentration. Because of the desire and lust for rūpa-brahma (form-sphere becoming) and arūpa-brahma (formless-sphere becoming) and because of attachment to jhāna, beings are swept away in the current of the flood of becoming. They sink in it. It becomes difficult for them to cross.

(iii) the flood of wrong views (ditthogha)

There are sixty-two wrong views (see Brahmajāla Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya); among them the most important that we need to relinquish is the wrong view of self-identity. Due to this wrong view, we suffer and risk falling into one of the four woeful planes. So, additional practice is necessary, in order to remove the wrong view of self-identity.

After meditators can directly discern ultimate materiality and mentality, they move on to the practice of “Dependent Origination” (*Paticcasamupāda*). With this practice comes the direct knowledge of cause and effect. Once they have directly discerned cause and effect, they continue on to insight meditation. It is at the stage of insight meditation that they examine the three characteristics of impermanence, suffering and non-self throughout the mind-matter complex. When a meditator’s insight matures, Path Knowledge arises. At this point, he or she sees Nibbāna. Materiality and mentality cease to be.

When Path Knowledge arises defilements are eradicated step-by-step. With the attainment of the first Path comes Stream Entry, the first fruit of enlightenment. One becomes a Sotāpanna. At the moment of this profound attainment, the defilements of self-identity, doubt and attachment to rites and rituals are eradicated once and for all. One who has attained Stream Entry knows and sees the workings of his or her defilements clearly. They understand ‘wrong view’ as any gross or subtle clinging to a belief in the concept of ‘I’, ‘me’ or ‘mine’. They no longer see greed as ‘my’ greed or hatred as ‘my’ hatred. And, they no longer harm themselves by willful or conscious physical and verbal actions that can lead to rebirth in any one

of the four woeful planes.

For most people, however, the flood of wrong view is overwhelming. Like programmed robots, we continue to indulge in unwholesome deeds in spite of our best intentions not to do so. We don't really want to change nor do we comprehend the truth of why we need to change. This leads to endless rounds of suffering in the four woeful planes.

Due to this wrong view, numberless beings are swept away in the flood of wrong view. They sink in it. It becomes difficult for them to cross.

(iv) the flood of ignorance (avijjogha)

This is not knowing the Four Noble Truths: *suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the way leading to the cessation of suffering.*

Discerning ultimate mentality and materiality is to directly know and see the First Noble Truth, the truth of suffering.

Discerning cause and effect is to directly know and see the Second Noble Truth, the origin of suffering.

Realizing the Deathless, Nibbāna, is to directly know and see the Third Noble Truth, the cessation of suffering.

In order to directly know and see the First, Second and Third Noble Truths, it is necessary to take on the training of morality, the training of concentration and the training of insight meditation. The Fourth Noble Truth is practicing the way leading to the cessation of suffering.

According to the Buddha,

Conventionally we see men, women, dogs, devas and

so on. But ultimately there is no one. There is only ultimate mentality and materiality.

Those who have penetrated ultimate mentality and materiality know and see things as they really are. They agree with the Buddha. They venerate the Dhamma. They regard the Sangha with respect. Right view illuminates their lives.

Have you ever inquired into why we are born as men or women? All around us we see men and women, dogs, chickens, and birds. Why are we born as humans and those other creatures born as dogs or chickens or birds? The cause is ignorance. To make this more understandable, I'll tell you about the practice of a meditator who penetrated the past causes responsible for the present results in her life.

She is an educated woman who lives in a large town.

When she directly discerned the cause of her present life, she saw an incident that occurred at the near-death moment of her previous life. It was a wholesome deed. She was offering fruit to a Buddhist monk. In that life she was a poor uneducated village woman who felt upset and dissatisfied with the conditions of her life.

While she was making the offering to the monk, she made a wish to become an educated woman. The image of that incident (offering fruit to the monk while wishing to become an educated woman) appeared to her at her near-death moment as if she was reliving it. It was this wish, the object of her near-death moment that created the desired result in her present life. In her specific case, there are five causes which generated the present effect. They are:

1. *Avijjā* (Ignorance): Her deluded thinking created the belief that an educated woman living in a large town truly exists.
2. *Taṇhā* (craving): Her desire to live the life of an educated woman created strong craving;
3. *Upādāna* (clinging): Holding onto the idea of living the life of an educated woman created strong clinging.
4. *Kusala sankhāra* (volitional formations): Her wholesome intention to offer fruit to a Buddhist monk created volitional formation.
5. *Kamma*: Her previous actions (either in this life or past lives) reappeared at her near-death moment, as if she was reliving them. Technically, this is *kamma*.

We can see, in this example, the relationship between the flood of ignorance, the flood of wrong view and the flood of sensuality. Not knowing the truth, which is ignorance, causes attachment to desire to arise – in this woman’s case, her desire to live the life of an educated woman. Because of our ignorance, we humans are exposed to many unexpected dangers. For clarity I will tell you a story.

One day a husband and wife set out across a desert. Their provisions were limited and, because they lacked sufficient food and drink for their journey, they soon felt tired and exhausted. Fortunately, they came to a village where a compassionate man kindly offered them well-prepared food. The husband was so hungry that he ate without noticing his measure. At the same time the villager fed his dog, giving the dog the same food that he offered

to the hungry husband and wife.

Seeing this, a thought appeared in the mind of the husband who had suffered so much on his journey across the desert and was upset about the conditions of his life: ‘Oh, it is better to be a dog.’

With this thought in mind, he continued eating until he made himself sick and died right then and there. In his next life, he took rebirth as a dog.

Because of *avijjā* (ignorance) the deluded man believed that the dog truly existed and *taṇhā* (craving) arose.

Because of *taṇhā* (craving) *upādāna* (clinging) arose.

Because of *upādāna* (clinging) *akusala sankhāra* (unwholesome volitional formations) arose.

Because of *akusala sankhāra* (unwholesome volitional formations) *kamma* arose.

Because of all of these the man was reborn as a dog.

That is why I said, ‘humans are exposed to many unexpected dangers because of not knowing the truth.’

Suppose there is a prisoner in a small room with a very small window. Because his life is extremely unpleasant, when he sees a bird flying outside the window, the thought may arise in him, ‘It is better to be a bird.’ If this *kamma* becomes his near-death object, he will be born as a bird in his next life.

Because we don’t know the truth, we are attached to both good and bad, superior and inferior, beauty and ugliness.

Due to ignorance, we crave existence for its own sake no matter what. It does not matter to most of us whether

it is existence in the human realm, the deva realms or the brahma realms. Our desire for existence is so strong in fact that we even believe existence in one of the miserable realms is better than not existing at all.

It is true that the flood of sensuality (*kāmogha*), the flood of becoming (*bhavogha*), the flood of wrong views (*dīthogha*) and the flood of ignorance (*avijogha*) are the floods difficult to cross.

One conditions another, *i.e.*, one reinforces and influences another and makes it stronger. One defiles another, or one supports another. These are the relations of the four floods.

We see the words ‘stopping’ and ‘struggling’ in the Buddha’s answer to the deva. Now that we all know what the floods are, do you understand what the Buddha meant?

The meaning of “stopping” is to perform unwholesome actions that lead to the four woeful realms.

The meaning of “struggling” is to perform wholesome actions that lead back to the human, deva or Brahma realms.

To help make it clear, let’s look at the way most human beings live. What are they doing?

Do they mostly perform ‘wholesome’ or ‘unwholesome’ acts? Unwholesome! Right? Let me ask you another question:

Do people really know the difference between ‘wholesome’ and ‘unwholesome’? Many would say, yes, of course – even ordinary people know the difference between ‘wholesome’ and ‘unwholesome.’ Do you agree?

Let me quote some words of the Buddha. At one time the Buddha was asked why, when everybody wished to be happy, most people were not happy? The Buddha answered that it was due to jealousy and stinginess.

Owing to these defilements, many people seek happiness for themselves but they ignore the welfare of others, even to the extent of causing others harm. However, to seek happiness in the wrong way brings little joy and much suffering. The worst part about this is that such people are mostly unaware that they are wrong, because they cannot differentiate between what is ‘wholesome’ and what is ‘unwholesome.’ You may not agree. If so, let me ask you a few more questions.

In the morning when you read the newspaper, what does morning news teach you? In the evening when you sit down to watch television, what does the TV teach you? This isn’t personal. The media teaches us how to fuel our greed. It bombards us with the never-ending message that when we cultivate and satisfy sensual pleasure, we will find happiness. It also promotes and glorifies violence. In the pursuit of sensual gratification, violence often takes place. In short, the content of newspapers and TV is filled with teachings that generally increase our greed, anger and delusion. Under their powerful influence, many people are led astray and onto the wrong path.

But does the fault really lie with what the mass media feeds us? After all, it just provides people with what they want and think is good. But what is good or not good does not always depend on what we think. The Buddha pointed this out in many suttas.

Once a famous stage manager and actor named

Tālāputa went to see the Buddha. He told the Buddha his teacher said because actors make people laugh with false stories they would, after death, be reborn in the company of *laughing devas*. He asked the Buddha for his opinion on this matter. The Buddha told him not to ask that question. However, the stage manager insisted and asked the same question three times. Then the Buddha told him that, if that kamma ripened, he would be reborn in the *laughing hell*. The reason is that he brought defiled or tainted happiness to many people, and made their greed, anger and delusion increase.

Thus, one of the benefits that Buddhism provides for humanity is the knowledge of what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. This kind of ‘right view’ is a very important factor for our individual welfare as well as for that of others. It is only with ‘right view’ that we can know how to walk on the right path. For example, after listening to the Buddha, the stage manager Tālāputa gave up his acting career and became a bhikkhu and practiced meditation. Before long, he attained arahantship.

Without right view, one often acts out of ignorance, chasing after sensual pleasures, craving name and fame, drinking and gambling. Such unrestrained self-indulgence leads to suffering. On the other hand, a person with right view engages in wholesome deeds, such as offering *dāna*, practicing virtuous conduct, cultivating loving-kindness and compassion, and purifying his mind through meditation. This leads to happiness.

In the Dhammapada verses 316 and 317, the Buddha says:

‘Those who are ashamed of what is not shameful, and unashamed of what is shameful, such beings, embracing wrong views, go to the woeful state.’

‘Those who see fear in the non-fearsome, and do not see fear in the fearsome, such beings, embracing wrong views, go to the woeful state.’

These words of the Buddha are a reflection of our modern age. For example, many poor people are ashamed of their poverty and many rich people are proud of their wealth; unattractive people are ashamed of their ugliness and beautiful people are proud of their beauty. But are money and beauty the yardsticks of what is shameful and what is not shameful? Certainly they are not. In either case, if a person is virtuous, then there is nothing to be ashamed of, but if the person is immoral, then even if he is very rich and handsome there is nothing to be proud of. Knowing this you should always examine whether what you are about to do is wholesome or unwholesome.

I hope that this helps you to see how people really do not know the difference between what is wholesome and unwholesome. Generally, what they like, they think is right (wholesome). What they dislike, they think is wrong (unwholesome). But wholesome and unwholesome can not be known by likes and dislikes. Right can not be wrong; wrong can not be right. Wholesome itself is wholesome; unwholesome is unwholesome. Personal preference can’t change them.

Returning to the sutta, the second question of the deva is:

“How is it, dear sir, that by not stopping and by

not struggling you crossed the flood difficult to cross?”

The Buddha answers this question by saying: “When I came to a standstill, then I sank; but when I struggled, then I got swept away. It is in this way, friend, that by not stopping and by not struggling I crossed the flood difficult to cross.”

“When I came to a standstill, then I sank” means if he performed unwholesome actions, he fell into the four woeful planes. “But when I struggled, then I got swept away” means if he performed wholesome actions, he was still reborn as a human or a deva or a Brahma. It is in this way that by not stopping and by not struggling he crossed the flood.

According to the Buddha: Mind itself is pure in origin but, because of associated unwholesome mental factors such as greed, hatred, delusion, pride, jealousy and stinginess, it becomes defiled. It inclines towards doing unwholesome actions almost all the time. Among associated unwholesome mental factors greed, which is craving, leads the world. That is why we see people around the world marching in the streets demanding that which they crave. Some are seeking better pay, others revenge, some cruel and unusual punishment, others support authorized killing or political changes, some want changes to educational systems. Some are even demanding the right to choose or perform abortions. All of these demands are rooted in hunger for sensual desire and the wish to have our personal views and opinions validated. It is obviously impossible to satisfy all these demands. Yet when people don't

get what they want they react with anger and become bitter. Hatred arises in their mind. Conversely, when they get what they want they are happy and proud of themselves. If someone else is successful, however, jealousy often arises in them. But, if they themselves are successful, what do they do? They tend to get bigheaded. Morning till night people spend hour after hour engaging in bodily, verbal and mental unwholesome actions. Is it any wonder why we all suffer so much?

Between birth and death we live mostly in the homes of greed, hatred, delusion, pride, jealousy and stinginess. These are homes that are truly bad for us. Even though we live in physical houses that we call home, for most of us our real home is the abode of greed, hatred, delusion, pride, jealousy and stinginess. These primal defilements come along with us at birth, and they trouble us throughout our lives. Most of us, unfortunately, are caught in their grip. They indeed become our real home.

The Dhammapada commentary says:

For the heedless, the four woeful states are like their permanent home.

As we all know, we don't often stay long where we are only visitors. It is natural for us to return to our home.

In the same way, the human and deva realms are places we temporarily visit only when the time is ripe. Sooner or later, along with our defilements, we have to return to our real home somewhere in the four woeful planes.

The chance of being born in a happy realm or a miserable one is clearly declared by Lord Buddha. The Mahāvagga Saṁyutta says:

On one occasion, the Blessed One took up a little bit of soil on the tip of his fingernail and addressed the bhikkhus thus:

“What do you think, bhikkhus, which is more: The little bit of soil on the tip of my fingernail or the great earth?”

“Venerable Sir, the great earth is more. The little bit of soil that the Blessed One has taken up on the tip of his fingernail is trifling. Compared to the great earth, the little bit of soil that the Blessed One has taken up on the tip of his fingernail does not bear comparison, does not amount even to a fraction.”

“So too, bhikkhus, those beings are few who, when they pass away as human beings, are reborn among human beings. But those beings are more numerous who, when they pass away as human beings, are reborn in hell.

Why? Because, bhikkhus, they have not seen the Four Noble Truths. What four? The Noble Truth of Suffering, the Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering, the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering and the Noble Truth of the Way Leading to the Cessation of Suffering.

“Therefore, bhikkhus, an exertion should be made to understand: ‘This is suffering.’ An exertion should be made to understand: ‘This is the origin of suffering.’ An exertion should be made to understand: ‘This is the cessation of suffering.’ An exertion should be made to understand: ‘This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.’”

The Buddha then continued: “So too, bhikkhus, those beings are few who, when they pass away as human beings, are reborn among human beings or the devas. But those beings are more numerous who, when they pass away as human beings, are reborn in hell, in the animal realm, in the sphere of ghosts.

“So too, bhikkhus, those beings are few who, when they pass away as devas, are reborn among the devas or human beings. But those beings are more numerous who, when they pass away as devas, are reborn in hell, in the animal realm, in the sphere of ghosts.”

“So too, bhikkhus, those beings are few who, when they pass away from hell, are reborn among human beings or the devas. But those beings are more numerous who, when they pass away from hell, are reborn in hell, in the animal realm, in the sphere of ghosts.”

“So too, bhikkhus, those beings are few who, when they pass away from the animal realm, are reborn among human beings or the devas. But those beings are more numerous who, when they pass away from the animal realm, are reborn in hell, in the animal realm, in the sphere of ghosts.”

“So too, bhikkhus, those beings are few who, when they pass away from the sphere of ghosts, are reborn among human beings or the devas. But those beings are more numerous who, when they pass away from the sphere of ghosts, are reborn in hell, in the animal realm, in the sphere of ghosts.”

Why? Because they have not seen the Four Noble Truths! Because of not knowing the Four Noble Truths, we live mostly in the home of greed, hatred, delusion, pride, jealousy and stinginess. This is the reason why few are reborn among human beings and the devas, but many more are born in hell, in the animal realm, or in the sphere of ghosts.

According to the Buddha: “Those beings are few who abstain from wine, liquors, and intoxicants that are a basis for negligence. But those beings are more numerous who do not abstain from wines, liquors, and intoxicants that are a basis for negligence.”

“So too, bhikkhus, those beings are few who honor their mother and father. But those beings are more numerous who do not honor them.”

“So too, bhikkhus, those beings are few who honor recluses. But those beings are more numerous who do not honor recluses.”

“So too, bhikkhus, those beings are few who respect their elders in the family. But those beings are more numerous who do not respect their elders in the family.”

“So too, bhikkhus, those beings are few who abstain from the destruction of life. But those beings are more numerous who do not abstain from the destruction of life.”

“So too, bhikkhus, those beings are few who abstain from taking what is not given. But those beings are more numerous who do not abstain from taking what is not given.”

“So too, bhikkhus, those beings are few who abstain from sexual misconduct. But those beings are more numerous who do not abstain from sexual misconduct.”

“So too, bhikkhus, those beings are few who abstain from false speech and divisive speech. But those beings are more numerous who do not abstain from false speech and divisive speech.”

“So too, bhikkhus, those beings are few who abstain from harsh speech and idle chatter. But those beings are more numerous who do not abstain from harsh speech and idle chatter.”

There are very few people who are performing wholesome actions. Instead, the great masses of humanity are engaging in unwholesome actions. As the Buddha pointed out, those performing wholesome actions are like the little bit of soil on the tip of his fingernail and those others who are engaging in unwholesome actions are like the great earth. Few can be reborn among human beings or devas. Most people on this great earth will be reborn in hell, in the animal realm, or in the sphere of ghosts. Why? The doors to these miserable states are opened by unwholesome deeds which we do in this life.

What happens if we fall to the four woeful planes? This is explained in the sutta named “Yoke with a Hole”. It is from Mahāvagga Saū yutta. In that sutta the Buddha said:

“Bhikkhus suppose a man would throw a yoke with a single hole into the great ocean and in it there is a blind turtle which comes to the surface once every hundred years. What do you think, bhikkhus,

would that blind turtle, coming to the surface once every hundred years, insert its neck into that yoke with a single hole?”

“If it would ever do so, Venerable Sir, it would be only after a very long time.”

“Sooner, I say, would that blind turtle, coming to the surface once every hundred years, insert its neck into that yoke with a single hole than the fool who has gone once to the nether world would regain the human state.

Why? Because in the nether world there is no conduct guided by the Dhamma, no righteous conduct, no wholesome activity, no meritorious activity. The more powerful ones are eating the weaker ones. They are killing and eating each other.”

That’s why if we fall to the four woeful planes it’s so difficult to be reborn among human beings or the devas. It does not matter how rich or poor we are, how beautiful or ugly we are or how high or low our living standards are. To avoid rebirth in hell, in the animal realm or in the sphere of ghosts, one needs to do good.

Even though it is better to be reborn among humans or the devas than in the nether world, with existence there is always birth, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair. We are not free from this whole mass of suffering.

Even though we know, ‘Man is mortal,’ when we are waiting for our last hour, we are afraid of death; we fear death. We grieve, we lament and become bewildered. To make it clear, let me quote a sutta from Aṅguttara Nikāya.

The title of the sutta is Abhaya Sutta, fearless. In it our Buddha said:

“There is indeed, brahmin, such a mortal who fears death, who is afraid of death. Who is the one who fears death?”

“There is, brahmin, a person who is not free from lust for sensual pleasures, not free from the desire and affection for them, not free from thirsting and fevering after them, not free from craving for sensual pleasures. Then it happens that a grave illness befalls him. Thus afflicted by a grave illness, he thinks: ‘Oh, those beloved sensual pleasures will leave me, and I shall have to leave them! Thereupon he grieves, moans, laments, weeps, beating his breast and becomes bewildered. This mortal is one who fears death, who is afraid of death.’”

How can we be reborn in the happy states if we died in this way?

“Further, brahmin, there is a person who is not free from lust for this body, not free from the desire and affection for it, not free from thirsting and fevering after it, not free from craving for the body. Then it happens that a grave illness befalls him. Thus afflicted by a grave illness, he thinks: ‘Oh, this beloved body will leave me, and I shall have to leave it! Thereupon he grieves, moans, laments, weeps, beating his breast and becomes bewildered. This mortal is one who fears death, who is afraid of death.’”

How can we be reborn in the happy states if we died in this way?

“Further, brahmin, there is a person who has not done anything good and wholesome, who has not made a shelter for himself; but he has done what is evil, cruel and wicked. Then it happens that a grave illness befalls him. Thus afflicted by a grave illness, he thinks: ‘Oh, I have not done anything good and wholesome, I have not made a shelter for myself, but I have done what is evil, cruel and wicked. I shall go hereafter to the destiny of those who do such deeds.’ Thereupon he grieves, moans, laments, weeps, beating his breast and becomes bewildered. This mortal is one who fears death, who is afraid of death.”

“Further, brahmin, there is a person who has doubts and perplexity about good Dhamma and has not come to certainty in it. Then it happens that a grave illness befalls him. Thus afflicted by a grave illness, he thinks: ‘Oh, I am full of doubts and perplexity about good Dhamma and have not come to certainty in it. I shall go hereafter to the destiny of those who do such deeds.’ Thereupon he grieves, moans, laments, weeps, beating his breast and becomes bewildered. This mortal is one who fears death, who is afraid of death.”

“These, brahmin, are four mortals who fear death and are afraid of death.”

Do you think it would be good to be included in these four types of mortals who fear death, are proud of themselves, and are heedless about doing what they need to do? We should give this careful consideration. All suffering arises due to becoming. So, becoming is not praise-

worthy!

That’s why the Buddha said:

“Bhikkhus, just as even a trifling bit of dung has an ill smell, so likewise do I not favor ‘becoming’ even for a trifling time, not even for the lasting of a finger-snap.”

So now we know what we are doing. We are ‘sinking and being ‘swept away.’ We sink into the four woeful planes by stopping and we are swept again and again by struggling and being reborn as humans or devas.

Let me ask you one more question: What else do we need to do?

In the Oghatarana Sutta, the Buddha answered:

“When I came to a standstill, then I sank; but when I struggled, then I got swept away, It is in this way, friend, that by not stopping and by not struggling I crossed the flood difficult to cross.”

What is the meaning of “by not stopping and by not struggling I crossed the flood difficult to cross?” In the commentary ‘not stopping and not struggling’ means following the Middle Way. The Middle Way means the way leading to Nibbāna which is the Eightfold Noble Path.

Having heard this the deva became a Sotāpanna.

So great was his respect for the Buddha that the deva, who had seen the True Dhamma, recited this stanza:

“After a long time at last I see

A brahmin (a Buddha) who is fully quenched,

Who by not stopping, not struggling,

Has crossed over attachment to the world.”

Our Bodhisatta and many people of his day (and even some today) have crossed the flood by not stopping and by not struggling. These people have followed the Middle Way. They have realized Nibbāna.

May we all be able to follow that Way.

May we all be able to cross the flood that is difficult to cross.

May you all attain final Nibbāna.

Sādhu! Sādhu! Sādhu!

The talk given on *Sunday*,

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and

November 2005 at Shuang Lin Monastery & Tisarana in *Singapore*