



Save your life

“Now this is a life or death matter.”

Adapted from a Q & A session with Ajahn Kalyāno at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, 2014.

To establish your mind in the present and to keep doing it, that’s the thing. The rest of it carries on from there. It means that you have to be willing to be with unpleasant feeling. So if you're feeling a bit nervous giving a talk because you don't know anybody, then you have to be willing to stay with that, otherwise you lose your mindfulness. ☺

I know a lot of people who talk about how practise can be integrated into every aspect of peoples daily lives. I don't believe that. There can be a tension here because there's a kind of underlying clash of values which isn't often explicitly pointed out. So I like to point it out, but it can be a dangerous thing to do: If you are really dedicated to practise you have to be willing to give things up and do all kinds of things. In this respect I'm a bit more of an uncompromising teacher, but that's the way it is.

I worked in hospitals for twenty years trying to help people. They all died. Worked in stroke units and with people with MS. Probably the people I treated twenty years ago are all dead by now.

If you got a mind that is dependent on the body, what happens when the body dies?
Now this is a life or death matter. That's how important it is.

You know, I'm trying to save your life.

(Pause 20 seconds...)

When I was an anagarika at Chithurst Monastery I had a dream that I was a physiotherapist – I was a psychologist first and then a physio – running around the wards and there weren't people in the beds, just organs. I went around and there would be a pair of lungs in one bed, a few entrails in another and a brain sitting in yet another. I was thinking to myself, “God, what am I going to do? It's hopeless.” ☺

Now I see that that was actually a breakthrough. I told this story to a monk friend in Thailand and he got really excited about it, “Wooah, good start!”. Because he knew about the pleasure of letting go, and he knew how potent those kinds of perceptions would be in terms of letting go, and also in terms of generating compassion. Both things.

(Pause 10 seconds)

We just had a week and a half’s retreat about death and dying and by the time it got half way it was all light as a feather. People were beginning to realize the joy of letting go.

Because we are not our bodies and we can see that we are not our bodies. This is the radical nature of the Buddhist teaching. And then we can find ourselves in a secure position. We are not in a vulnerable position any more. Then we have a refuge. Before that, we have no refuge.

If you believe in rebirth you can think we go from one life to another and assume, “Oh, it's not that bad. We get another life, we get another swing at it.” It's true, but we don't know where or under what circumstances we are going to end up.

Here we are with this opportunity – we are intelligent people and we got the Buddha's teaching. People often don't realise how deep this thing goes, what an incredible blessing it is.

Now, I live in the hope that people are going to realise. They have seen the mindfulness side, and got faith in that, because it works, it really works. It works for depression and anxiety – hugely! The results are amazing.

That kind of thing is going to give people enough faith to take it further. If they fall in love with the present moment, then they are going to keep wanting to take it further and further. And that's all you have to do – simple as that. The whole thing is that, the whole of Buddhism is that. In other words to find all the different ways that your mind goes out of the present and stopping them. Finding a natural presence, a completely natural presence. That's the deathless. That's what this place is for: *Amaravati* – the deathless realm.

Yet it takes a lot of courage to look at these things, doesn't it? To look at what our situation is as human beings and the fact that we are all going to get old and die. For me they were right in my face, I couldn't avoid it in the hospitals, but I put myself in that position deliberately. That process can be a source of terrible sorrow, anguish, pain and difficulty or it can be a source of joy – because it can be a source of letting go. It can all be a source of letting go – of freedom.

But if you hang onto something that's impermanent, it's gotta be suffering, isn't it?

(Pause 20-30 seconds...)

What this comes around to is a life in which we're not seeking anything but we are still receiving the world into our awareness – we are not losing anything.

What's the difference between walking out of here and picking the flowers, bringing them back in and putting them in a vase, enjoying them; or walking out there and enjoying the flowers sitting there in the beds?

That's the difference between the spiritual life and life caught up in the things of the senses. A life caught up in the things of the senses are going to pick the flowers, and try and grasp those experiences – take them home with you, but only to watch them die. Spiritual life is where you see the flowers and leave them in the ground, right where they are. You don't grasp them, you don't take them home – and so they don't die.

The reality we have to come to terms with is that our minds have been grasping all our lives. It's the nature of the mind to grab everything. Our whole life is like running up a ladder. We don't know anything other than grasping until we have managed for one moment to let go.

It can be a tremendously humbling experience the first time: you can think, “Oh, gosh. What have I been doing all my life? Here I was grabbing a hold of all these things, thinking that they would keep me going in life.”

I thought my motorbike was keeping me going. But it was me who was keeping it going, wasn't it?

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