

AN ASPECT OF LIFE

By Ven. Vinita Thera

LIFE does provide us with many unpleasant surprises so that even the best amongst us cannot help being momentarily disturbed and shocked. The world is full of disappointment said the Buddha. Things do not happen as we wish them to. This being so, we must train ourselves to face any situation with fortitude. We may not be able to change them, but certainly we can change ourselves. If a thing is unalterable then there is no alternative but to submit to it, or in other words maintain a happy resignation to the inevitable. This does not mean that we should simply bow down to all the adversities that come our way. Not in the least. That is mere fatalism. As long as there is a chance that we can change a situation in our favour, let us try; but when common sense tells us that we are up against something that is so, and cannot be otherwise, then let us not be worried about it. A modern poet puts it nicely when he said:

"For every ailment under the sun,
There is a remedy or there is none;
If there be one, try to find it,
If there be none, never mind it,"

There are many who keep their balance when everything goes well. But let disappointments come - business failure, sickness, death in the family - then they lose their balance and even go to the extent of committing suicide.

We become elated or depressed because of ignorance. The wise can control his own reactions in moments of success. This does not mean that we should be gloomy fellows who do not laugh or smile. Far from it, the true Buddhist is a cheerful person indeed. When control has been acquired in times of success, it becomes possible to exercise it in moments of distress as well. In times of distress one must bear in mind that we are not the only persons involved. There are many others who face similar problems. May be that our troubles are nothing when compared to those of others. The fact that others are in the same position as we are may not help us but we can gain a sense of relief from the fellowship of adversity.

Our books are full of stories where men of power were reduced to insignificance. There is the story of the Millionaire of Rajagaha who was worth 160 million. He lost all that wealth and had to beg in the streets. Then there was King Asoka who was the sovereign of India which comprised much

more territory than present India. But his end was very sad. When he died he had only a nelli fruit (Myrobalan) which he could call his own.

We need not go so far back to history to quote such instances. Look at the story of a famous man who lived in America. He was the richest man in the world till recently. His daily income was over a million dollars. Nothing lighted his face save news of bargain. He would dance in his room when he made a big profit. But when he lost money he was ill. He never insured his goods. That cost him money. Once he shipped some goods worth a considerable amount to a distant port. The ship was caught in a storm. When the news reached him he lost his head. He at once summoned his assistant and asked him to take out an insurance, if it was not too late. It cost him only 150 dollars. But when he returned to the office he found this man in a worst state of nerves. A telegram had arrived in the meantime. The cargo had landed safely from the storm. He was sicker than ever now for they had wasted the 150 dollars. In fact, he was so sick that he had to go home and take to bed.

Now think of that - the richest man in the world with a daily income of over a million dollars making himself ill over 150 dollars! His condition became serious. All the best doctors in America were summoned to his bedside but in vain. He lost his appetite and had to be fed on human milk. Strange enough his hair fell away and even the eye lashes. Finally the doctors told him the shocking truth. He could have his choice - his life or money. When the doctors finally undertook to save him, they gave him advice which he carried to the very letter for the rest of his life. (1) Never to worry. (2) To relax. When he stopped worrying about money, he was better. This man who was given up as dead at the age of 53 was 98 when he died. Now that was an instance where a millionaire risked his life because he did not know how to control himself in times of gain and loss.

Now let us see how the Buddha behaved under similar circumstances. He had rich supporters like Anathapindika and Visakha, and even kings like Bimbisara and Pasenadi Kosala. At the same time there were instances when he had to starve. Once he entered a village called Pancasala for alms, and not a grain of rice was offered to him that day. It is said that Mara in order to injure the Buddha took possession of the villages and prevented them from offering him any food. When the Buddha was returning to the monastery with empty bowl, Mara appeared before him, and pretending to be sorry about it said, "It is a pity, Venerable Sir, that you had to forego your meal today". "You are mistaken, I can live on happiness," replied the Buddha. Cannot we adopt a similar attitude if somebody steals our food? At least we can be happy that we still have the appetite.

Then on another occasion the Buddha had to spend a night in a forest. It was a cold night and the ground was hard. He spread his robe on the ground and slept on it. In the morning a Prince happened to pass that way. Seeing the Buddha, he came up to him and asked, "Venerable Sir, did you sleep well last night?" "Yes", replied the Buddha. "I slept comfortably, for I am one of those who sleep comfortably in the world."

From these two incidents we gather that circumstances do not make a person happy or otherwise. It is the way one reacts to circumstances that determines his feelings.

The Buddha's fame, it is said, spread from the lowest hell to the highest heaven. Even other religious teachers spoke well of him. But at the same time there were many who were out to disgrace him. The naked ascetics openly accused him. Grave charges like murder and seduction were levelled at him. The Buddha was neither elated by fame nor depressed by ill-fame. But his personal attendant, Venerable Ananda, who was not yet an Arahant, was disturbed when he heard this accusation that took place :-

Ananda: Venerable Sir, let us leave this village.

Buddha: Why do you say so, Ananda; what is the reason?

Ananda: Venerable Sir, these naked ascetics spread false rumours against us, and people seem to believe them.

Buddha: All right Ananda, suppose we leave this village and go to another. And if the people there too abuse us. What will you do then?

Ananda: Then, Venerable Sir, we go to another village.

Buddha: Ananda, if we were to attune to the rhythm of the wicked, there won't be a single place on this earth for us to live.

"I am like an elephant in battle-field. Arrows fly past the elephant in all direction. Withstanding them the elephant moves forward. So shall I endure abuse? Why? Most people are wicked."

It is common occurrence in the world that innocent and great people are often being criticised. Mud has always been flung at notable personages. All the great philosophers and religious teachers since the beginning of history have been victims of them and were even put to death. The people of Athens envious and jealous of Socrates framed charges against him and condemned him to

death. Jesus Christ was crucified by the very neighbours whom he loved as himself. Violence was used against Mahatma Gandhi - the champion of non-violence - and he was shot to death. The Buddha was no exception. Several attempts were made on his life by one of his disciples and a near kinsman (Devadatta). But he being a Buddha could not be killed.

No one can escape blame. They blame those who sit silent. They blame those who speak much. They blame those who speak little. There is no one in the world who is not blamed. Says the Buddha,

*“Just as a solid rock
Remains unshaken by the wind
Even so, may blame and praise
Not ruffle the wise.”*

The Buddha says that there cannot be real happiness in a changing world. We have only to look round to be convinced of this truth. Which is the home that has not mourned the death of a near and dear one? Who is the person who is really free from sickness and old age? There may be some at this moment who are free from any great trouble of both mind and body. But alas! very soon the law of impermanence will lay its cruel hands on them. And then all youth will end in old age, all health in sickness, all strength in impotence, all beauty in ugliness, and all life in death. Nothing can stop this - not even regal power, wisdom or wealth. Even the Blessed One whose material body was adorned with the thirty-two marks of a great man, who surpassed greatness of fame, greatness of understanding, who had no equal, accomplished and fully enlightened - even he had to face sickness, old age and death. What need is there to talk of weaklings like us?

In this present life we have seen the ambitions of many professional men turn ashes on the eve of success. We have seen how powerful men, leaders of armed might, had tragic ends. We have seen how men like Hitler and Mussolini, whose words shook the world, die like dogs and have their corpses kicked in the dust. Such is world power and pleasure.

What then should be our attitude to this changing world? Weeping is in vain. That will make matters worse. Nor is resignation the best way. Understanding the true nature of the world let us face life bravely. Let us remember the advice given by the Buddha to Nakulapita. Nakulapita in his old age, broken down and sick, visits the Buddha, and the Buddha tells him. "Though sick of body, mind shall be healthy. Thus should you train yourself."

How then is one to cultivate this healthy mind in spite of all this? The Buddha tells that too. Once a Deva approached the Buddha and questioned him thus:-

(Venerable Sir, tell me how these monks who live in the forest and who take only one meal a day, are so happy?)

To this Buddha replied: -

“They make no lamentation over the past. They yearn not after which is not come. But what is now do they maintain themselves. Hence they are happy.”

Here is the recipe for those who seek real happiness. Do not repent over the past or worry about the future. Live happily in the present.

People are driven mad not by today's problems, but the bitterness and anxiety over something that had happened yesterday or may happen tomorrow. Today is the day over which one has any control.

*"Yesterday was but a dream
Tomorrow only a vision
But today well lived
Makes every yesterday a dream of happiness,
And every tomorrow a vision of happiness"*

The average man places his happiness in things external to him in property, rank, wife, children, friends and the like. The moment he loses them or finds them disappointing, the foundation of his happiness is lost. There is no denying the fact that these external objects add to one's happiness in a small measure; but impermanence being their very nature, they ultimately lead to unhappiness.

Happiness is not of the body. The healthy man flushed with the gift of physical well-being can be discontented and unhappy. The healthy body is no guarantee of happiness. At the opposite extreme even when the body is sick, even then he may still be happy. Happiness is not a possession. You can possess the whole world and yet be unhappy for all that. It is not to be found in achievement for you can reach your furthest objective and yet miss happiness. You can find fame, fortune and success and still lose the gift of happiness.

Happiness is a state of the mind. It is not what happens but our reactions to what happens that determine our degree of happiness or misery.

Circumstances have power to disrupt peace of mind only if we let them. Events are things of the external world. Happiness belongs to the internal world. It is not what happens without but the reaction within that counts.

In other respects the aims of men vary; but in this, the aim of all mankind is as one - the search for happiness. Look round and see where you are. See what

sort of a world you are living. It is a world in which you will find men who are just like yourself in most ways. Like yourself they want to get through life with as little unhappiness and pain and sorrow as they can manage. How are you and how are they going to secure this? For all these fellow men, as for yourself, the world contains a great deal of what you do not like. You cannot always avoid all of it. But there is some of it which you can avoid if you wish, and are willing to make the effort needed in order to avoid it. You can come to some agreement among yourselves that you will not intentionally cause trouble, annoyance, pain, and sorrow to one another by your behaviour.

The Buddha suggests that at least for the sake of your own benefit, advantage, and well-being you undertake to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxicating drinks. By doing this and making sincere and determined effort to keep such a promise, you will avoid adding any more to the already sufficient pain in the world. While it is beneficial and advantageous to observe these five precepts, it is also a beginning upon the road that leads to Nibbana — the highest state of happiness!

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