

Aging with Wisdom and Compassion Session 3 10-19-2026

Home Practice:

Sit every day for 20-40 minutes

Say or chant and then reflect on any version of the Five Remembrances

Reflect on these study questions:

How can Illness be a teacher?

What have I learned when I've needed to rest in bed?

When I fall ill, how attached am I to being able to still be "productive," or can I easily allow myself to rest and heal?

In what ways can I understand the Buddha's Dharma as medicine?

To what degree do I see illness as part of life or as an anomaly?

Do I feel guilty when I get sick?

Notes:

Illness - The Second Remembrance – some reflections

Illness is unavoidable.

This week we are attending the second messenger: illness. We can include in this all sorts of accidents and injuries that result in the body not being healthy, not just diseases.

"Those not busy being born are busy dying" is a quote from an old Dylan song. The body is growing, or the body is dying. That's the way it can feel over the span of our life. We are young, we grow older, our health and vitality decrease, and then we die, but it's not really either growing or dying because the body has been and is currently in a state of constant change. Many cells die, and many others are born at the same time. The body has about 30 trillion cells in total. 330 billion cells are being replaced every day. (87% of that total are red blood cells). That's 3.8 million cells being replaced every second.

We think health is the norm and illness is an anomaly. But you can also see it this way: illness is an integral and expected part of life. The body has a major system, the immune

system, which evolved millions of years ago to deal with invading bacteria, viruses, and toxins. Thank goodness it works on its own without “our” need to intervene. We should maybe look more closely at our illusion of control. We can, of course, take care of hygiene, eat healthy food, get enough sleep and exercise, manage our stress – and still fall ill.

The question is: when the body becomes afflicted, can the mind be free from affliction? This brings us to the second arrow: as living beings, we are all subject to painful feelings in the body and mind. That pain is the first arrow that comes with having a human existence. The second arrow occurs when we create a ‘me’ that takes the pain on as personal suffering, leading to worry, self-pity at times, anger, and fear. To prevent the second arrow, we can see through this process of creating a suffering self. Dharma becomes the medicine that helps us “see” how to remove the arrow.

In the PDF version of the home practice, [I have included the sutta](#) we read in our session, where the Buddha compares himself to a surgeon summoned to remove the arrow. I’ve included a second sutta we mentioned where the Buddha talks about the interdependence of the patient and the caregiver.

Dealing with the difficulty of pain.

By being with physical or emotional pain with mindfulness and compassion, we can help it heal and pass. Our resistance provides the energy that can allow the pain to persist longer. The more stability and steadiness of mind that is available in the moment, the easier it will be to do this. But it’s not always easy. The dharma teaching of impermanence and not-self reminds us that “This is my experience, but it’s not me. Many others experience this too. This will pass, as all things do.” In addition to the medicine of Dharma, here are some tips for dealing with pain.

1. Using mindfulness and concentration, awareness can penetrate the pain. See and touch the pain as if it were a child that we are taking care of. Mindfulness itself is a form of compassion, because it is a form of acceptance.
2. Use a neutral object like the breath. It can take a lot of energy to be with pain, but often there are other non-painful sensations in the body at the same time, that we can bring awareness to when, out of self-compassion, we need to back off.
3. Investigate the sensations; notice the “label” of pain. The actual sensations can often be broken down into stretching, burning, heat, cold, etc. These shift and change, some decreasing, some increasing.
4. It can be skillful to direct the attention elsewhere until you can face it.

5. This is a training. Start working with small pains. Try to be with them when you are not in great pain, so that when greater pain arrives, you are better prepared.
6. Know your energy. Use small gentle efforts. For example: If sitting becomes painful after ten minutes, try a short sitting of eleven minutes, instead of a long one.

Self-care Seed Thoughts, taken from *Ten Thousand Joys & Ten Thousand Sorrows: A Couple's Journey Through Alzheimer's* by Olivia Hoblitzelle.

May I cultivate compassion toward myself and others

I trust my ability to handle whatever comes up

May I find new ways of handling my negative emotions

My presence alone is a gift

Let me find ways to bring lightness to our situation

May I stay open, flexible, and caring

I need to take care of myself

Let me practice calm awareness for both of us

May I appreciate our special moments

(Sunakkhatta Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya 105)

Suppose a man were wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and companions, his kinsmen and relatives, brought a surgeon. The surgeon would cut around the opening of the wound with a knife, then he would probe for the arrow with a probe, then he would pull out the arrow and would expel the poisonous humour without leaving a trace of it behind. Knowing that no trace was left behind, he would say: 'Good man, the arrow has been pulled out from you; the poisonous humour has been expelled with no trace left behind, and it is incapable of harming you. Eat only suitable food; do not eat unsuitable food or else the wound may heal. From time to time wash the wound and from time to time anoint its opening, so that pus and blood do not cover the opening of the wound. Do not walk around in the wind and sun or else dust and dirt may infect the opening of the wound. Take care of your wound, good man, and see to it that the wound heals.' The man would think: 'The arrow has been pulled out from me; the poisonous humour has been expelled with no trace left behind, and it is incapable of harming me.'

So too, it is possible that some bhikkhu here might think thus: 'Craving has been called an arrow by the Buddha; the poisonous humour of ignorance

is spread about by desire, lust, and ill will. That arrow of craving has been pulled out from me; the poisonous humour of ignorance has been expelled. I am one who is completely intent on nibbāna.' Being one who really is completely intent on nibbāna, he would not pursue those things unsuitable for one completely intent on nibbāna: He would not pursue: unsuitable forms with the eye, unsuitable sounds with the ear, unsuitable odors with the nose, unsuitable flavors with the tongue, unsuitable tangibles with the body, or unsuitable mind-objects with the mind. Because he does not pursue [these things], lust does not invade his mind. Because his mind is not invaded by lust, he would not incur death or deadly suffering.

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I have given this simile in order to convey a meaning. This is the meaning here: 'Wound' is a term for the six internal bases. 'Poisonous humour' is a term for ignorance. 'Arrow' is a term for craving. 'Probe' is a term for mindfulness. 'Knife' is a term for noble wisdom. 'Surgeon' is a term for the Tathāgata, the Accomplished One, the Fully Enlightened One.

Patient and caregiver – interdependence

(Taken from the sutta “A Monk with Dysentery”). In the story, the Buddha himself takes care of an ill monk, with help from his attendant Ananda, and he also chides other monks for failing to attend to him. In this section of the sutta, the Buddha goes on to talk about the interdependent qualities of a patient and a caregiver.)

(Mahāvagga 8:26)

One who is ill is easy to tend to when they are endowed with these five qualities: one does what is beneficial; one knows moderation in what is beneficial; one takes medicine; one makes clear the disease just as it comes to be to one who tends the sick and who wishes him well, saying as it is getting worse, ‘It is getting worse,’ or as it is getting better, ‘It is getting better,’ or as it is stable ‘It is stable;’ one becomes the kind of person who endures arising bodily feelings which are painful, acute, sharp, shooting, disagreeable, miserable, deadly.

One who tends the sick is fit to tend the sick when they are endowed with these five qualities: one is competent to provide the medicine; one knows what is beneficial and what is not beneficial; one takes away what is not beneficial, and brings forward what is beneficial; one tends the sick with a loving mind (*mettā-citta*), not in the hope of gain; one does not loathe to remove excrement or urine or sweat or vomit; one is competent to gladden, rejoice, rouse, and delight the sick from time to time with dhamma-talk.
