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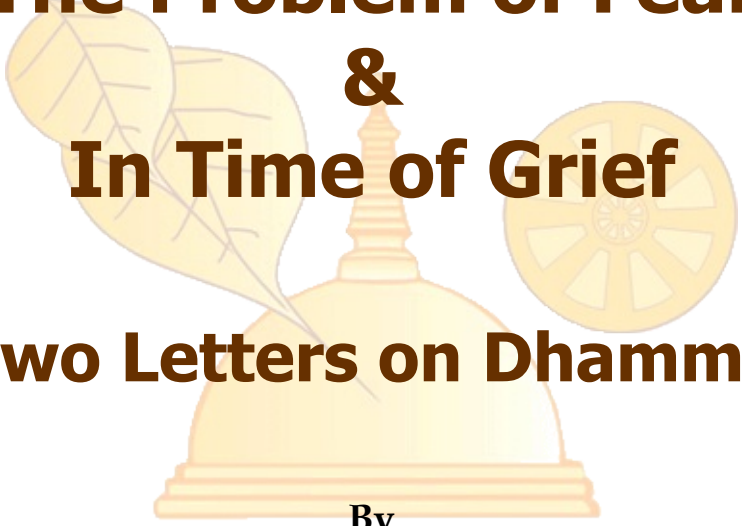
The Problem of Fear & In Time of Grief

Two Letters on Dhamma

Nina Van Gorkom



BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY



**The Problem of Fear
&
In Time of Grief**

Two Letters on Dhamma

By

Nina Van Gorkom

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The Problem of Fear

D

ear Khun Charūpan
15 July 1983

You asked my comment on a few Dhamma questions. These are questions we all have and I find it helpful to think about the answers since this gives me an opportunity to consider Dhamma. I will repeat your questions and comment on them.

Question: What is the characteristic of fear and how can it be overcome? I have fear of old age, sickness and death. I fear sickness and death of those who are dear to me. I have many kinds of fears. I also fear an unhappy rebirth. So long as one is not a “stream-enterer” (*sotāpanna*), the noble person who has attained the first stage of enlightenment, one may be reborn in an unhappy plane where there is no opportunity to develop right understanding of the phenomena of our life. The good deeds one performs in this life are no guarantee of a happy rebirth. A bad deed performed even in a past life may condition an unhappy rebirth.

Answer: Fear can be a form of aversion and then it is unwholesome. When there is aversion we do not like the object experienced at that moment. We tend to

cling to pleasant objects and to have aversion towards unpleasant objects. Aversion may be slight or it can be stronger, it may amount to hate. It can also take the form of fear and dread. When there is fear we shrink back from the object experienced and would like to flee from it. Or we may think with worry and dread about an unpleasant event which may happen in the future, such as old age, sickness and death, or an unhappy rebirth.

Fear arises so long as there are still conditions for its arising. It cannot be eradicated at once. Only the “non-returner” (*anāgāmi*), the noble person who has attained the third stage of enlightenment, has fully uprooted it. The development of right understanding of the phenomena that appear in our life is the only way leading to the eradication of fear. When fear appears we can learn to see it as it is: only a reality which arises because of its own conditions and which does not belong to a self.

Fear is conditioned by ignorance and by clinging. We cling to all the pleasant objects and we fear to lose them. We read in the Gradual Sayings (Book of the Sixes, Ch. III, par. 3, Fear) about different names given to sense-desires, in order to show their dangers. One of these names is fear:

And wherefore, monks, is fear a name for

sense-desires? Monks, impassioned by sensuous passions, bound by passionate desire, neither in this world is one free from fear, nor in the next world is one free from fear. Therefore “fear” is a name for sense-desires.

In order to develop right understanding we should be aware of any reality that appears and we should not reject anything as an object of awareness. When fear appears it can be an object of awareness.

We may have theoretical understanding of the fact that we cannot control any reality that arises and that we thus cannot control the rebirth-consciousness of the next life. However, we still may be troubled by fear of rebirth. It is love of “self” which conditions this fear. We are worried about what will happen to the “self” after we die and we are afraid that this “self” will not be successful in developing understanding of realities in the next life. The stream-enterer does not worry about what will happen to a self, because he has eradicated belief in a self. Moreover, he has no more conditions for an unhappy rebirth. So long as one is not a stream-enterer one clings to a self and there are conditions for an unhappy rebirth.

It is understandable that we worry about the possibility of developing right understanding in the next life. However, we should remember that no

moment of awareness is ever lost; each conditions the arising of awareness again later on. Also, awareness which arises now is conditioned: it is conditioned by moments of listening to the Dhamma and considering it, moments which arose in the past, even in past lives. Even so, awareness which arises now, although it does not stay, conditions awareness in the future because it can be accumulated from moment to moment. Even if the next birth should be in an unhappy plane where there is no opportunity to develop right understanding, there will be following lives again in other planes where the development of understanding can continue. Even the Bodhisatta was reborn in the hell plane, but after that life he was reborn in the human plane where he continued to develop right understanding of realities.

Unwholesome fear, which is a form of aversion, is harmful for mind and body. However, there is also *wholesome fear*, that is, fear of unwholesomeness and its consequences. This fear is different from aversion. Unwholesome consciousness (*akusala citta*) is accompanied by unwholesome mental factors (*akusala cetasika*) and wholesome consciousness (*kusala citta*) is accompanied by beautiful mental factors (*sobhana cetasika*). Mental factors each perform their own function while they assist the consciousness they accompany.

Among the beautiful mental factors which accompany each act of wholesome consciousness are “moral shame” (*hiri*), shame of unwholesomeness (*akusala*), and “fear of blame” (*ottappa*), fear of the consequences of unwholesomeness. When these two mental factors perform their functions there cannot be unwholesome consciousness at that moment. There can be wholesome fear of the danger of the cycle of birth and death. With right understanding we can see the disadvantages of the imperfections and defilements that lead to rebirth. So long as there is ignorance and clinging, there has to be rebirth again and again. Wholesome fear of the danger of rebirth can urge us to persevere with the development of right understanding until all defilements are eradicated. Then there will be no more rebirth.

When the Buddha was still a Bodhisatta he developed right understanding with patience and perseverance in order to attain Buddha-hood so that he could teach other beings the way leading to the end of birth. The Mugapakkha Jātaka (VI, No. 538) gives an impressive account of the Bodhisatta’s heroism.

He never was neglectful of his task of developing wisdom, since he had a wholesome fear of rebirth in hell. He had to suffer severe tribulations, but he was always perfectly composed and never showed any weak point. When we are in difficult situations do we

have perseverance to develop right understanding of realities? We may find it difficult to be aware of whatever reality appears through one of the six doors, in particular when we are very busy or when we are in the company of other people. We could consider such circumstances as a test or an examination we have to pass. If we fail we have to begin again and again.

We read in the Mughapakkha Jātaka that the Bodhisatta was born as the son of the King of Kasi and received the name Temiya. He remembered that in a former life when he was a king he condemned people to death. As a result of his unwholesome kamma he was reborn in hell. After that he was reborn as Prince Temiya. When he remembered his former lives he decided that he did not want to succeed his father as king and therefore he pretended to be a cripple, deaf and dumb. Five hundred infants born to the concubines of the king were his companions. When they cried for milk he did not cry, reflecting that to die of thirst would be better than to reign as king and risk rebirth in hell. Milk was given to him after the proper time or not at all, but he did not cry. The nurses spent one year in trying him but did not discover any weak point. In order to test him the other children were given cakes and dainties and they quarrelled and struck one another. The Bodhisatta would not look at the cakes and dainties. He told himself, “O Temiya,

eat the cakes and dainties if you wish for hell!”

People kept on trying him in many ways but he was always patient and composed, realising the danger of an unhappy rebirth. People tried to frighten him with a wild elephant and with serpents but they did not succeed. They tempted him with pleasant objects. Performances of mimes were given and the other children shouted “bravo” and laughed, but Temiya did not want to look and remained motionless, reflecting that in hell there never would be a moment of laughter and joy. In order to know whether he was really deaf they tested him by a burst of sound made by conchblowers, but they “could not through a whole day detect in him any confusion of thought or any disturbance of hand or foot, or even a single start.” They smeared his body with molasses and put him in a place infested with flies which bit him, but he remained motionless and perfectly apathic. When he was sixteen years old they tried to tempt him with beautiful women who were dancing and singing, “but he looked at them in his perfect wisdom and stopped his inhalations and exhalations in fear lest they should touch his body, so that his body became quite rigid.”

The Bodhisatta looked with perfect composure and with wisdom at the beautiful women. While he was motionless during his trials and tests he was not idle, he was mindful. In order to attain Buddhahood he had

to develop right understanding with perseverance. He was mindful of whatever reality appeared, no matter in what situation. Although this is not always mentioned in the Jātaka's, it is implied.

Finally the king was advised to bury him alive. When the charioteer was digging the hole for his grave, Temiya was adorned by Sakka, king of the gods, with heavenly ornaments. He then told the charioteer that he was not a cripple, deaf and dumb. He became an ascetic and preached to his parents about impermanence:

“It is death who smites this world, old age who
watches at our gate,
And it is the nights which pass and win their
purpose soon or late.
As when the lady at her loom sits weaving all
the day,
Her task grows ever less and less—so waste our
lives away.
As speeds the hurrying river's course on, with
no backward flow,
So in its course the life of men does ever
forward go;
And as the river sweeps away trees from its
banks uptorn,
So are we men by age and death in head-long
ruin born.”

He explained to his father that he did not want the kingdom, stating that wealth, youth, wife and children and all other joys do not last:

“Do what you have to do today,
Who can ensure the morrow’s sun?
Death is the Master-general
Who gives his guarantee to none.”

These words can remind us not to put off our task of developing right understanding. The Bodhisatta was unshakable in his resolution to develop right understanding. Also, when he was put to severe tests he did not prefer anything else to the development of wisdom. Are we resolute as well? Or are we forgetful of what is really worthwhile in our life? Wisdom is more precious than any kind of possession, honour or praise.

When we acquire wisdom, when we learn to see realities as they are, as mere mental and physical phenomena which arise due to conditions, we will no longer think ourselves to be so very important, and we will be less anxious about our “self.” The Buddha’s teachings remind us to consider the danger of the cycle of birth and death. If we do so, instead of unwholesome fear, there will arise wholesome fear urging us to be aware of the present moment.

Question: In order to lead a wholesome life is it sufficient to keep the Five Precepts? I feel that so long as one does not harm others there are no defilements. Is that right?

Answer: We may keep the precepts but that does not mean that we have eradicated defilements. Only the noble persons who have attained the fourth and last stage of enlightenment, the arahats, are without defilements. We should develop understanding of our different types of consciousness. Then we will discover that there are many more unwholesome moments of consciousness than wholesome ones.

There are different degrees of defilements: they can be coarse, medium or subtle. Evil deeds by body, speech and mind are coarse defilements. But even when we do not commit evil deeds there are countless moments of unwholesome consciousness: these are medium defilements. For example, attachment and aversion may not motivate unwholesome deeds, but they are still unwholesome and thus dangerous. Unwholesome consciousness which arises falls away, but the unwholesome tendency is accumulated and it can condition the arising of unwholesomeness again. The unwholesome tendencies which are accumulated are subtle defilements. Even though they are called subtle, they are dangerous. Like microbes infesting the body, they can become active at any time. So long as

they have not been eradicated they can condition the arising of unwholesome consciousness and of unwholesome deeds, and thus keep us in the cycle of birth and death.

Different objects are experienced through the five sense-doors of eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body-sense, and through the mind-door. On account of the objects which are experienced defilements tend to arise. A visible object, for example, is experienced by seeing-consciousness through the eye-door. Seeing-consciousness experiences only the visible object, it does not know anything else and at that moment there is no like or dislike of the object. However, shortly after the seeing has fallen away there are moments of consciousness which are either wholesome or unwholesome. When we are not engaged with generosity, with morality or with other kinds of wholesomeness, unwholesome consciousness has the opportunity to arise. Clinging is likely to arise very often after seeing, after the other sense-cognitions and also when we think.

When we think about events or people, the thinking is done either with wholesome consciousness or with unwholesome consciousness. We often think with clinging or attachment. Attachment can be accompanied by pleasant feeling or by indifferent feeling. When it is accompanied by indifferent feeling

we may not notice it. We like to perceive all the familiar things around us, and we don't want to miss out on anything. This shows our clinging. Do we like softness? When we sit on a hard floor, there may be aversion. Aversion is conditioned by clinging. When we are aware of different realities we will know that there are many more unwholesome moments of consciousness than we ever thought. It is better to know the truth than to deceive ourselves.

Even when we keep the precepts and do not transgress them for a long time, it does not mean that we will never neglect them. So long as we have not become stream-enterers there are still conditions for unwholesome deeds which may produce an unhappy rebirth. When there is, for example, danger to our life, we may neglect the precepts. Only when one has attained to the stage of the stream-enterer can right understanding of the mental and physical phenomena of our life condition purity of morality to the degree that one never again neglects the Five Precepts.

Question: Although I know that gain, honour and praise do not last and can only arise when there are conditions for their arising, I cannot help being distressed when I do not get the rank or position I believe I deserve. What can I do in order to have less ambitions?

Answer: We are ambitious because we think ourselves to be important. Our clinging makes us unhappy. While we strive to get something there is clinging. Also, when we obtain what we want we hold on tightly. Clinging is the cause of endless frustrations. We want the “self” to become more important, but then it will be all the harder to eradicate the idea of self. If we think more of others the self will become less important.

We may have reflected on the impermanence of realities which arise because of conditions, or on the impermanence of all pleasant objects, but if we do not develop direct understanding of the realities which appear, understanding will not be strong enough to overcome clinging.

We should not only develop understanding when we are disappointed and unhappy, but we should begin right now. If we do not begin now how can there ever be less clinging to the self? We cling so much to our body, but in reality there are only different elements: solidity, cohesion, temperature and motion. The element of solidity, for example, which appears as hardness or softness, can be directly experienced through the body-sense without there being the need to think about it or to give it a name. When hardness appears there can be awareness of it and then understanding can see that it is only

hardness, not a body that belongs to us. Hardness is only hardness, it does not matter whether it is hardness of what we call the body or hardness outside. If there is awareness of it when it appears we will begin to see it as an element, not self.

When right understanding is being developed we will also see that realities such as honour or praise are only elements and that they do not belong to a self. Thus there will be more confidence in the Dhamma and we will consider the Dhamma more precious than honour or praise.

We can easily be infatuated by gains, favours or flattery. They are treacherous because they seem desirable, but they lead to misery. In the Kindred Sayings (II, Nidana Vagga, Ch. XVII, Kindred Sayings on Gain and Favours) there are forty-three suttas which point out to us the dangers of gains, favours and flattery. They are as dangerous as a fisherman's hook to the fish, as a thunderbolt, as a poisoned dart which wounds a man, as a hurricane which hurls a bird apart. People who do not easily lie tell deliberate lies when they are overcome by desire for gains, favours and flattery. We read in par. 10 of this section:

Dire, monks, are gains, favours and flattery, a bitter, harsh obstacle in the way of arriving at uttermost safety. Concerning this matter, I see

one person overcome, and whose mind is possessed by favours, another who is overcome and possessed by lack of favours, yet another who is overcome and possessed by both favours and the lack of them—I see one and all, at the separation of the body after death, reborn in the Waste, the Woeful Way, the Downfall, Hell. So dire, monks, are gains... Verily thus must you train yourselves: “When gains, favours, and flattery come to us, we will put them aside, nor when they come shall they take lasting hold on our hearts.”

In whom, when favours fall upon him or
When none are shown, the mind steadfast,
intent, Sways not at all, for earnest is his life,

Him of rapt thought, (of will) unfaltering,

Of fine perception, of the vision seer,
Rejoicing that to grasp is his no more: Him let
the people call in truth Good Man.

With mettā, Nina

In Time of Grief

March 1979

Dear Maud

You asked me whether the Buddha's teachings could console our friend Ina, who lost her husband and who has to bring up her children all by herself.

The Buddha's teachings can help us to have right understanding about life and death. What is life? Why must we die? We make ourselves believe that life is pleasant, but there are many moments of pain and sickness, sorrow and grief. And inevitably there is death.

Everything which arises must fall away, it cannot stay. We are born and therefore we have to die. The body does not disintegrate only at the moment of death, there is decay each moment. We notice that we have become older when we see a photograph taken some time ago. But the change which is noticeable after some time proves that there is change at each moment.

There are many phenomena taking place in our body, and they change each moment. Temperature changes: sometimes we feel hot, sometimes cold. We

feel motion or pressure in our body time and again. What we take for “our body” is a compound of many different elements which arise and then fall away, but we are so ignorant that we do not notice it. The Buddha reminds us that our body is like a corpse, because it is disintegrating, decaying each moment. Our body does not belong to us but we cling to it: we are ignorant of the truth.

We may understand intellectually that the body does not really exist as a unitary whole and that it is only a composite of physical elements which change all the time. However, intellectual understanding is thinking, and thinking, even if it is right thinking, cannot eradicate wrong understanding of reality. We should learn to experience the truth directly.

Can we experience the body as it really is? Let us for a while forget about our theoretical knowledge of the body and ask ourselves whether there is not a bodily phenomenon now, which we can experience directly, without having to think about it. While we are sitting or walking, is there no hardness? Can it be experienced now, just for a moment, without having to think about it? These are physical elements which can be directly experienced, one at a time, through the body-sense.

There are many different kinds of elements. The

element which is solidity can be directly experienced as hardness or softness, when it appears through the body-sense. Body-sense is all over the body. In order to experience hardness and softness, we do not have to think of the place where they appear.

Temperature is another physical phenomenon, an element that can be directly experienced. It can be experienced as heat or cold when it appears through the body-sense. There is change of temperature time and again. Is there not sometimes heat, sometimes cold? We do not have to think about it in order to experience it.

I have given only a few examples of bodily phenomena, physical elements which constitute the body. These examples may help us to see that all the Buddha taught can be proven through direct experience. Knowledge developed through direct experience is clearer than theoretical knowledge. The knowledge acquired through direct experience is the wisdom the Buddha taught his disciples to develop, so that all ignorance and clinging can be eradicated.

When we gradually learn through direct experience that what we take for our body is only physical elements which do not stay, we will be less taken in by an idea of our body as belonging to ourselves. We will see more clearly that all that arises, be it dead matter

or a living being, is subject to decay.

Not only bodily elements arise and fall away, also what we call mind arises and falls away each moment. There is no lasting mind or soul, there is only a moment of consciousness now, and this falls away to be succeeded by the next moment. There may be thinking now, but it falls away to be succeeded by the next moment. Don't we think now of this, now of that? Thinking never stays the same. Can we control our thinking? Now we may have attachment, then aversion, then a moment of generosity. Is there generosity all the time? It falls away and very soon afterwards there may be pride, or stinginess.

What we call mind consists of many different elements which arise and then fall away immediately. The birth and death of consciousness occurs time and again all through life. Thus, we may understand that what we call in conventional language "dying" is in fact not different from what takes place each moment of our life.

The Buddha and the disciples who had attained to full enlightenment felt no grief about anything, whatever happened to them. So long as we have not attained to full enlightenment, we are still capable of feeling deep grief when those who are dear to us die, and at times we think with fear of our own death.

Does the Buddha have a message for us who are only beginners on his path? The Buddha has a message for all those who are afflicted by grief and are disturbed by the thought of death. He teaches us to develop clear comprehension of the present moment. The wisdom the Buddha taught us to develop is knowledge acquired from direct experience of the physical elements and mental elements of which our life consists. Mental elements are moments of consciousness, feelings and other mental qualities such as anger and attachment.

We can have clear knowledge only of what occurs at the present moment, not of what is past already. Is there hardness now? Is there heat or cold now? These are only physical elements. Is there pleasant feeling now? Is there dislike of something now? Those are only mental elements. We are not used to considering the world in us and around us as elements. We may be inclined to say, "How can this kind of understanding help me now? It will not return to me my husband or wife, my child or my friend who has died. It will not alleviate my bodily pain, it cannot make me healthy again."

When we learn to see realities as elements which do not belong to us and which are beyond control, there will be less ignorance in our lives and we will then suffer less from life's adversities.

We still may have sorrow, but we should know sorrow as it is. Sorrow or grief is a kind of aversion, it is dislike of something we experience. It is natural that we feel grief. It is bound to arise when there are conditions for it. We had aversion in the past and this conditions the arising of aversion today. Ignorance of realities conditions everything unwholesome including aversion. Aversion is also conditioned by attachment. We are attached to the pleasant feeling we have when we are in the company of someone dear to us. When that person isn't around anymore we experience grief. Thus, it is actually a selfish clinging to our own pleasant feeling that conditions grief. This may sound crude, but if we are honest with ourselves we can see that it is true.

When we know more about the conditions for grief, we can understand that grief is only a mental element. Grief does not last, it falls away as soon as it has arisen. It may arise again, but then it is a different moment of grief. When we learn to see grief as a conditioned phenomenon, we will think less in terms of "my grief," and thus we will be less often overpowered by it. Our life consists not only of grief; there are many other realities which arise. When there is, for example, seeing or hearing, there cannot be grief at the same time.

When we learn to know the present moment, we

will worry less about the past. What has happened, has happened already, how can we change it now? What can be done now is the development of right understanding of the present moment.

We read in one of the Jātakas, the Birth Stories of the Bodhisatta, in the “Birth Story about Desire” (Kāma Jātaka, No. 467) about grief conditioned by clinging. In the commentary to this story we read that a brahmin cultivated corn with the greatest care, intending to offer it when ripe as alms to the Buddha and his disciples. However, the night before he was to reap it, a great flood carried away the whole crop. The brahmin pressed his hand to his heart; overcome with grief, he went home weeping and lay down lamenting. The Buddha came in order to console him and said: “Why, will what is lost come back when you grieve?” The brahmin answered: “No, Gotama, it will not.” The Buddha then said:

“If that is so, why grieve? The wealth of beings in this world, or their corn, when they have it, they have it, and when it is gone, it is gone. There is no composite thing that is not subject to destruction: do not brood over it.”

After the Buddha’s discourse the brahmin could see realities as they are and attained enlightenment.

“For each desire that is let go

A happiness is won:
He that all happiness would have,
Must with all lust have done."

With mettā, Nina

Table of Contents

| | |
|---------------------|----|
| Title page | 2 |
| The Problem of Fear | 4 |
| In Time of Grief | 19 |