**The Heavenly Messengers spiritual guide to illness
Ayya Santussika Bhikkhuni**

Like any of us, the Buddha experienced illness and injury. He sometimes had wracking pain. Towards the end of his life, he had chronic pain. He also had a doctor. He took medicine. He rested when he was sick. When his muscles were tight and painful, he stretched. Like us, he did what he could to relieve his physical pain and discomfort, to take care of the body. But unlike most of us, he did not suffer mentally over this. There was no worry or even aversion. Once when he was injured we are told: “Excruciating were the bodily feelings that developed within him — painful, fierce, sharp, wracking, repellent, disagreeable — but he endured them mindful, alert, & unperturbed.” (Saṃyutta Nikāya 1:38 – See *Beyond Coping*, pg. 96)

As ordinary people, when there is illness or injury, we see it as a problem. We want to fix it, get rid of it, get over it, push it away. When this doesn’t work, we might experience distress, worry, fear, anger or depression. These states are mental suffering. We try to find pleasant feeling to override the painful feeling. We adhere to the pleasant feeling. This way of relating to illness (and life in general) is so automatic we think it is natural, the only way.

The Buddha made it very clear that this is not the only way, in fact that there is a way to experience illness that leads to complete peace. By applying mindfulness and clear comprehension, we can identify how the mind is processing our experience. We are wired for physical survival. We react strongly to threats to the body. As we see clearly the suffering of the mind, we can step back to a solid platform of Dhamma. This is the application of the First Noble Truth, to recognize the suffering of the mind and come to understand it.

Through practicing serenity meditation, we establish sufficient calm in the mind that we can look at the discomfort and deterioration of the body without flinching. Through our development of the heart in loving kindness and compassion practice, we can embrace and hold all the feeling arising in the mind the way we would hold an injured child, soothing, accepting, knowing our feelings for what they are. Through investigation and discernment meditation and contemplation, we gain the clear understanding needed to experience feeling simply as feeling, and begin to see how our mental states are influenced by desire, aversion and delusion. We come to the point of being able to clearly identify those mental states of suffering and develop the ability to not allow them to “invade the mind and remain.”

Through our investigation we experience how bodily feeling and mental states are constantly arising and ceasing. They are constantly changing and cannot possibly define us or belong to us: not me, not mine, not myself. The distance created by that single step back from our raw bodily and mental experience, allows us to rest and glimpse the bigger picture. There is always space surrounding the experience, where there is peace. This peace comes from the knowledge and vision of things as they really are. This peace may come as a surprise. This is the heavenly message. Illness can shake us out of the dream that has us believing that our physical and mental experience, tainted by desire, aversion and delusion are in fact reality. Even a taste of true understanding and freedom evokes urgency for the practice of the path. And every time we use even the slightest illness to follow this path, we become stronger, more resilient, more thoroughly immunized against sinking into the illusion of self and suffering. We go way beyond coping. Faith and determination arise as we come ever closer to the realization of nibbana.