Meeting the Divine Messengers

by Bhikkhu Bodhi

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The traditional legend of the Buddha's quest for enlightenment tells us that throughout his youth and early manhood Prince Siddhattha, the Bodhisatta, lived in complete ignorance of the most elementary facts of human life. His father, anxious to protect his sensitive son from exposure to suffering, kept him an unwitting captive of nescience. Incarcerated in the splendor of his palace, amply supplied with sensual pleasures and surrounded by merry friends, the prince did not entertain even the faintest suspicion that life could offer anything other than an endless succession of amusements and festivities. It was only on that fateful day in his twenty-ninth year, when curiosity led him out beyond the palace walls, that he encountered the four "divine messengers" that were to change his destiny. The first three were the old man, the sick man, and the corpse, which taught him the shocking truths of old age, illness, and death; the fourth was a wandering ascetic, who revealed to him the existence of a path whereby all suffering can be fully transcended.

This charming story, which has nurtured the faith of Buddhists through the centuries, enshrines at its heart a profound psychological truth. In the language of myth it speaks to us, not merely of events that may have taken place centuries ago, but of a process of awakening through which each of us must pass if the Dhamma is to come to life within ourselves. Beneath the symbolic veneer of the ancient legend we can see that Prince Siddhattha's youthful sojourn in the palace was not so different from the way in which most of us today pass our entire lives — often, sadly, until it is too late to strike out in a new direction. Our homes may not be royal palaces, and the wealth at our disposal may not approach anywhere near that of a North Indian rajah, but we share with the young Prince Siddhattha a blissful (and often willful) oblivion to stark realities that are constantly thrusting themselves on our attention. If the Dhamma is to be more than the bland, humdrum background of a comfortable life, if it is to become the inspiring, sometimes grating voice that steers us on to the great path of awakening, we ourselves must emulate the Bodhisatta in his process of maturation. We must join him on that journey outside the palace walls — the walls of our own self-assuring preconceptions — and see for ourselves the divine messengers we so often miss because our eyes are fixed on "more important things," i.e., on our mundane preoccupations and goals.

The Buddha says that there are few who are stirred by things that are truly stirring, compared to those people, far more numerous, who are not so stirred. The spurs to awakening press in on us from all sides, yet too often, instead of acknowledging them, we respond simply by putting on another layer of clothes to protect ourselves from their sting. This statement is not disproved even by the recent deluge of discussion and literature on aging, life-threatening illnesses, and alternative approaches to death and dying. For open and honest awareness is still not sufficient for the divine messengers to get their message across. In order for them to convey their message, the message that can goad us on to the path to liberation, something more is needed. We must confront aging, illness, and death, not simply as inescapable realities with which we must somehow cope at the practical level, but as envoys from the beyond, from the far shore, disclosing new dimensions of meaning.

This disclosure takes place at two levels. First, to become divine messengers, the facts of aging, illness, and death must jolt us into an awareness of the fragile, precarious nature of our normal day-to-day lives. They must impress upon our minds the radical deficiency that runs through all our worldly concerns, extending to conditioned existence in its totality. Thereby they become windows opening upon the first noble truth, the noble truth of suffering, which the Buddha says comprises not only birth, aging, illness, and death, not only sorrow, grief, pain, and misery, but all the "five aggregates of clinging" that make up our being-in-the-world.

When we meet the divine messengers at this level, they become catalysts that can induce in us a profound internal transformation. We realize that because we are frail and inescapably mortal we must make drastic changes in our existential priorities and personal values. Instead of letting our lives be consumed by transient trivia, by things that are here today and gone tomorrow, we must give weight to "what really counts," to aims and actions that will exert a lasting influence upon our long-range destinies — upon our final destiny in this life, and upon our ultimate direction in the cycle of repeated birth and death.

Before such a revaluation takes place, we generally live in a condition that the Buddha describes by the term *pamada,* negligence or heedlessness. Imagining ourselves immortal, and the world our personal playground, we devote our energies to the accumulation of wealth, the enjoyment of sensual pleasures, the achievement of status, the quest for fame and renown. The remedy for heedlessness is the very same quality that was aroused in the Bodhisatta when he met the divine messengers in the streets of Kapilavatthu. This quality, called in Pali *samvega,* is a sense of urgency, an inner commotion or shock which does not allow us to rest content with our habitual adjustment to the world. Instead it drives us on, out of our cozy palaces and into unfamiliar jungles, to work out with diligence an authentic solution to our existential plight.

It is at this point that the second function of the divine messengers comes to prominence. For aging, sickness, and death are not only emblems of the unsatisfactory nature of mundane existence but pointers to a deeper reality that lies beyond. In the traditional legend the old man, the sick man, and the corpse are gods in disguise; they have been sent down to earth from the highest heaven to awaken the Bodhisatta to his momentous mission, and once they have delivered their message they resume their celestial forms. The final word of the Dhamma is not surrender, not an injunction to resign ourselves stoically to old age, sickness, and death. This is the preliminary message, the announcement that our house is ablaze. The final message is other: an ebullient cry that there is a place of safety, an open field beyond the flames, and a clear exit sign pointing the way of escape.

If in this process of awakening we must meet old age, sickness, and death face to face, that is because the place of safety can be reached only by honest confrontation with the stark truths about human existence. We cannot reach safety by pretending that the flames that engulf our home are nothing but bouquets of flowers: we must see them as they are, as real flames. When, however, we do look at the divine messengers squarely, without embarrassment or fear, we will find that their faces undergo an unexpected metamorphosis. Before our eyes, by subtle degrees, they change into another face — the face of the Buddha, with its serene smile of triumph over the army of Mara, over the demons of Desire and Death. The divine messengers point to what lies beyond the transient, to a dimension of reality where there is no more aging, no more sickness, and no more death. This is the goal and final destination of the Buddhist path — Nibbana, the Unaging, the Unailing, the Deathless. It is to direct us there that the divine messengers have appeared in our midst, and the good news of deliverance is their message.

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