

Winter 2006: Is it Possible to Practice with Dementia?

QUESTION: Is there a Buddhist perspective regarding practitioners who become afflicted with Alzheimer's disease or dementia? Since the mind is the primary tool with which we work toward the realization of buddhanature and enlightenment, what does it mean if one loses that mind, or loses the capacity to practice, long before one dies?

I've been able to find teachings and information on Buddhist skills for caring for loved ones with dementia, but I cannot seem to find anything on the potential quandary of practicing Buddhism if confronted with dementia oneself. What happens to our right effort if we lose the ability to practice or to work with our mind? And what happens to the skillful means we developed for our own death?

NARAYAN LIEBENSON GRADY: As far as I know, there is nothing in the sutras that specifically addresses this question. However, in Buddhist teachings, illness is one of the four heavenly messengers (the others are old age, death, and renunciation). Dementia is obviously a form of illness. As such, it is a wake-up call. The Buddha wanted us to reflect on the fact that we don't have forever to practice; we may even lose the use of our minds at some point. In reflecting on the impermanence of youth, health, and longevity, we may find more motivation for practice and truly reorder our priorities in life. In other words, we may do our best to live the teachings of the Buddha right here and now.

Regarding your question about whether it's possible to practice with Alzheimer's disease or dementia, I have some firsthand knowledge, having observed a meditation teacher at Cambridge Insight Meditation Center who had dementia during the last few years of his life. In the early stages of his illness, he would frequently forget what he was about to say. As time went by and the illness progressed, often he didn't know where he was or what to do next. At first this caused him a great deal of anxiety. However, because of his many years of dedicated practice, as well as being with a life partner who helped him enormously, he began to look more directly at the anxiety itself and he learned to be less afraid of forgetting. In other words, the suffering lessened because he became more at peace with himself. During the more advanced stage of his illness, this usually was not possible.

So some practitioners may be able to apply the teachings to an extent as they begin to experience mental deterioration. What may be important is not to hold on to idealized ways of how things should be but to practice surrendering to how things are. For example, if you're frightened or angry, be aware that fear and anger are happening.

For me, the two essential components that are necessary in this kind of situation are committed *bhavana* (mental development) and noble friendship. Noble friendship is contact with

fellow practitioners, which is essential as our bodies and minds weaken. We benefit from the love and support of those who are patient and experienced in the practice. This applies not only if one is suffering from dementia-even in old age we can see how interdependent we are, as we become increasingly dependent on those around us. It seems to me that an aspect of one's practice is to allow others to help. In cultivating wise friendships with those we trust, we are more likely to be in good hands when things break down. Those holding the "higher ground" can be a refuge and remind us of who we really are.

Perhaps with an immense depth in the practice, it is possible to experience life from a deeper place, even if the brain breaks down before death. Nisargadatta Maharaj, a great Hindu teacher who lived in India, implied that he observed himself becoming senile and was not at all bothered by it because he knew so clearly that he was neither his body nor his mind.