

The Five Reflections  
by Nick Koch

*I am subject to aging. Aging is unavoidable. I am subject to illness. Illness is unavoidable. I am subject to death. Death is unavoidable. I will grow different, separate from all that is dear & appealing to me. I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and live dependent on my actions. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir. We should often reflect on this.*

The Upajjhatthana Sutta “Subjects for Contemplation” also known as the Five Reflections is among the most well known Buddhist teachings and is worth exploring in more detail. One reason this Sutta is well known is because the first section, paraphrased above, is often chanted because the Buddha said to reflect often on aging, illness, death, separation, and our actions (kamma). The five reflections is easily seen as a teaching with universal application to everyone. We are all in this together, on the course of aging, illness, and death.

While the first four reflections may be depressing, it is important to have a realistic picture before considering the last reflection, the best course of action. So it's not all dismal, we can make better choices and suffer less. Consider another similar miserable contemplation, the Stoic practice of negative visualization, where one imagines a worst case scenario in detail. The idea is that it can help us be more prepared if the event actually happened, and also helps counteract our tendency to take what we have for granted.

The structure of this text can be broken down into four sections. First, the five reflections. Second, the reason why one should reflect in this way. Third, further consideration. And lastly, the poem at the end. Often when the five reflections are mentioned only a paraphrase or chant of the first part is covered, thus this article is meant to help show a more complete picture.

The larger context behind the five reflections is contained in two Pali terms, samvega and pasada. Samvega is a complex emotion covering the shock, dismay, alienation, and angst of dealing with aging, illness, death, and loss. We are encouraged to actively reflect on these facts in order to come to terms with samvega. There is value in focusing on the destructive aspects of life in order to comprehend them. So there is suffering, now what? Pasada is the attitude of clarity, composure, and confidence that something can be done. Our actions matter. We all want happiness, but are often not sure what to do. What if we all cultivated generosity, virtue, renunciation, wisdom, effort, patience, truthfulness, determination, good will, and equanimity?

The first three reflections are simply facts of life, sometimes called the three messengers. A dramatized later biography of the Buddha says he was raised a sheltered life of luxury and was shocked after seeing sickness, old age, and death for the first time. The reflection on separation is can further sober us up to the impermanence and unreliability of life. The last reflection on action is meant to point out what is really important in life, what path of action to take. A 4th messenger appears to the Buddha as an ascetic, showing the Buddha the opportunity of renunciation. So the story goes he left his family and began his search for something of lasting value. How should we live? What is under our control and what is not? What actions have lasting worth in the end?

Perhaps the most interesting part of the text is the part that is usually missed. While the usual paraphrase states that these facts are unavoidable, paying closer attention to the original words and phrasing gives the sense that aging, illness, and death have not been overcome yet. The goal of the Buddhist path was described in many ways including: unconditioned (asankhata), ageless (ajara), deathless (amata), limitless (ananta), beyond (para). All this is pointing at awakening, a space beyond ordinary conscious experience.

The second part of the text gives rational for contemplating these subjects. The text says people are typically intoxicated with their youth, health, and life. The young don't think much about becoming old, and so on. As the saying goes, the young think themselves invincible. We crave and cling to things that are dear and appealing to us. And so the text states, *they conduct themselves in a bad way in body... in speech... and in mind*. Reflecting on these facts can help to avoid unskillful actions and become more rational, more sober.

The third part of the text suggests further consideration that you are not the only one that is subject to aging, illness, death, separation, and owning your actions. This is meant to broaden your scope of awareness. The entire world is composed in this way. It's not that the world is conspiring to burden and cause hardship to you alone. The text states, *When one often reflects on this, the [factors of the] path take birth. One sticks with that path, develops it, cultivates it. As one sticks with that path, develops it and cultivates it, the fetters are abandoned, the obsessions destroyed.*

The poem at the end of the text pointedly suggests, how often do we as a society try to ignore or hide the facts of old age, illness, and death? How often are we repelled by these facts and try to avoid them, rather than accepting them and acting with compassion? The remainder of the poem concludes with a brief overview of the path of practice, hopefully inspiring the way.

Bellow are two translations of the poem, the first by Thanissaro Bhikku, and the second by Bhikkhu Bodhi. Perhaps the interpretation and wording of one or the other resonates better for you, and it can help to compare and contrast.

## POEM

Subject to birth, subject to aging,  
subject to death,  
run-of-the-mill people are repelled by those who suffer  
from that to which they are subject.  
And if I were to be repelled  
by beings subject to these things,  
it would not be fitting for me, living as they do.  
As I maintained this attitude —  
knowing the Dhamma without paraphernalia —  
I overcame all intoxication  
with health, youth, & life  
as one who sees  
renunciation as rest.  
For me, energy arose,  
Unbinding was clearly seen.  
There's now no way  
I could partake of sensual pleasures.  
Having followed the holy life,  
I will not return.

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Worldings subject to illness  
old age, and death are disgusted  
by other people who exist  
in accordance with their nature.  
If I were to become disgusted  
with beings who have such a nature  
that would not be proper for me  
since I too have the same nature  
While I was dwelling thus  
having known the state without acquisitions,  
I overcame all intoxications—  
intoxications with health,  
with youth, and with life—  
having seen security in renunciation.  
Zeal then arose in me  
as I clearly saw nibbana.  
Now I am incapable  
of indulging in sensual pleasures.  
Relying on the spiritual life,  
never will I turn back.

## RESOURCES

1) Anguttara Nikaya 5.57 – Upajjhatthana Sutta

<http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/an/an05/an05.057.than.html>

<https://suttacentral.net/en/an5.57>

2) Five Recollections Pali chant with English

[http://dhammatalks.org/Archive/Chants/07FiveRecollections\(p25\).mp3](http://dhammatalks.org/Archive/Chants/07FiveRecollections(p25).mp3)

3) The Buddhist Teachings on Samvega & Pasada by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

<http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/affirming.html>

4) Five Facts to Continuously Reflect on by Jayarava

<http://jayarava.blogspot.com/2011/08/five-facts-to-continuously-reflect-on.html>

6) Sutta study guides by Piya Tan:

<http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/5.12-Abhinha-paccavekkhitabba-Thana-S-a5.57.pdf>

<http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/48.10-Yama-Devaduta-S-a3.35-piya.pdf>

7) The Five Reflections talk by James Baraz, 50 min.

<http://dharmaseed.org/teacher/86/talk/18818/>

8) The Five Daily Reflections talk by Noah Levine, 34 min.

<http://www.againstthestream.org/five-daily-reflection-noah-levine/>

9) Five Daily Reflections talk by Robert Beatty, 41 min.

<http://www.portlandinsight.org/node/128>

10) Five Facts to Consider Talk by John Haspel, 40 min.

<https://crossrivermeditation.com/upajjhatthana-sutta-five-facts-to-consider-talk/>

11) Wise Effort: Spiritual Urgency talk by Andrew Chapman, 38 min.

<https://againstthestreamnashville.com/2016/02/25/wise-effort-spiritual-urgency/>

12) Upajjhatthana sutta talk by Ratnaguna, 52 min.

<https://thebuddhistcentre.com/manchester/upajjhattana-sutta>

13) Five Recollections talk by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 22 min.

<http://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2003/0303n4b1%20Five%20Recollections,%20The.mp3>