

Greeting the Devadutta!

It has been a challenging but very rich time for practice these past six months. I won't attempt a full report here, but maybe over the next year I'll reflect and write some more if it seems useful. Here I'll just focus on the time around the operation.

As many of you know I'd been having throat pain and difficulty swallowing for over a year before a major cancer was diagnosed in July of this year. The news was grim: major surgery required to remove the tumour, which would also mean removing the pharynx (linking the back of the mouth with the rest of the throat) the oesophagus (food pipe) and the larynx (voice box). The surgeons would then take a section from the jejunum (small bowel) to replace the oesophagus, while the trachea (wind pipe) would be diverted to the front of the neck, so I would breathe through this opening rather than through the nose and mouth. Even with all this surgery, the odds were only 50:50 that the outcome would be successful, with the first two weeks post-op being critical. Because of losing the voice box, the only way to speak after the operation would be with an electro-larynx (a mechanical sound source held against the throat), and perhaps several months later a 'voice valve' could be inserted in the throat. How well I could speak and swallow food would depend on how well the tongue and jaw and other tissues healed after the operation.

And that was the best scenario! If, on opening up the throat they found the tumour had grown too close to major blood vessels then the surgery would have to be aborted, and no other treatment could be offered.

With only two weeks between the diagnosis and the surgery my mood swept between bright "it will all work out somehow" bravado, through to fear, confusion and all shades in between. There were moments of calm too, and the faith that my core desire for this life, to come to know and understand the Dhamma, would not suffer. Indeed I could only profit from this 'devadutta' (messenger from the gods) showing me the reality that all pleasures, including the pleasures of speaking and eating, must sooner or later come to an end. Bhante reminded me that 50:50 odds weren't all that bad, and optimistically predicted that that within a year I'd be well enough to help him with some interviews at Satipanya. His vision helped me meet the devadutta with some enthusiasm.

Messages of goodwill started pouring in from friends and family and from so many of you who I had met on retreats or through teaching. I thought I'd better try to harness all this good energy, and the evening before the surgery friends from our Dublin meditation group gathered round my hospital bed for a sit. At the same time, Bhante led a sit at Satipanya dedicated to my healing and friends all around Ireland and even throughout Europe joined in. The collective outpouring of compassion and goodwill lifted my spirits and by the following morning I was in good heart for the surgery.

I woke, twelve hours later, to find my great friends Margaret and Pat, beaming at me. The operation had gone well – no hitches. In my post-anaesthetic blur, I was also euphoric and, unable to speak, kept tracing out the letters 'love' in the air. But when I woke the next day it was as if into a nightmare. I found myself terrified of my new reality, terrified of life, wanting to curl up into a ball and shut out the whole world. My body felt alien, a strange new entity from which my mind recoiled in dread. I didn't have much pain, but it was as if I didn't recognise much of my body. Partly this may have been the effect of the anaesthetic, and partly, as I found out later, that many nerves were cut during surgery, so that I had lost sensation in much of my neck and tongue. I could barely move and strange-tasting secretions flooded my mouth and throat. I couldn't swallow them back - surely I would drown? It took a long time to trust that my airway was now separate from my mouth so the flood couldn't drown me.

I was in the semi-darkness of ICU (Intensive Care Unit) hooked up to a ventilator to help me breathe, heart and blood pressure monitors, a urinary catheter as well as several other tubes draining away fluid from the wounds in my neck and stomach. Every so often a nurse would insert a tube into my mouth or windpipe to suck out secretions. All around me machines clunked and beeped. My body burned with anxiety and I felt weak, helpless and immensely frightened. Where was peace or goodness to be found? Remembering the meditation of the pre-op day and the many cards and goodwill messages I had received, I sensed that the surrounding ocean of goodwill was the only thing

carrying me through. As for myself, I felt myself to be completely out of metta or courage. But goodwill there was, though I could not acknowledge it at the time: through little gaps in the mayhem I would murmur in my heart 'this is the Dhamma unfolding' to help me remember the greater truth. I found I could turn my ankles and wrists. Each turn was a deliberate choice to engage with life, especially with this new body which frightened me so. Turn by turn the seconds and hours slipped by.

During those first nightmare days, my friend Margaret was the up-front manifestation of all the wide ocean of goodwill that surrounded me. For hours she sat there, holding my hand, or placing cool cloths on my forehead and limbs. Her presence was calming. It was calm I craved, not stimulation of any sort. What conditions could favour calm? I tried to minimise input from the world. Even opening and reading the cards that were still arriving brought up emotion. I opened just one or two a day, and so, over several weeks, the huge outpouring of compassion for my situation trickled gradually into my heart.

Conversation mostly brought a host of emotional reactions, now that I could only scrawl words on a whiteboard to reply. How to make visiting hours a support as opposed to another challenge? I asked family not to call – I reckoned the dukkha of attachment to my previous 'caregiver' role would be too much to bear in my vulnerable condition. I asked for only a few women friends whom I sensed as calming 'yin' presences, and who I felt would be happy to sit quietly and just 'be there'. Most men with their more stimulating 'yang' energies were barred for those first weeks!

Touch became an important means of contact, now that speech was gone. There were precious moments when I felt a warm, calm energy flowing from my friends' hands into my heart and mind. Then I would be alone again, working as best I could with aversion; turning my wrists with mindful deliberation, turning my ankles, choosing the reality on offer.

When I could relax deeply I would often come to a scared stiff edge of reason with my mind desperately afraid of some dark reality being presented through my body. But time and again I found some channel through the darkness – a channel of 'unknowing' I called it – a meeting with that which lies beyond the self. This was always a wonderful experience. Each time that blessed channel opened I knew again that the deepest desire in life is not for good health or any of the wonders that world can offer, but for this deep communion with truth. At these moments I could greet the devadutta gladly.

These moments inspired me to continue the work with anxiety and other aversive mind-states, to keep turning towards them rather than being overcome and defined by them. And, with the aid of doctors and nurses and the whole health-care system and medication and those machines that clunked and beeped, my body started to recover. As I grew stronger physically, some of the anxiety receded. I began to feel my way back into social life with the understanding and encouragement of friends. When I could bear the thought of the outside world, I could look through my cards and know there was a deep wellspring of compassion and goodwill around me. And so, little by little, I began to relax into my new life.