

## *The View from the Mountaintop*

*January 23, 2014*

It's good to come out to a place like this. It gives you a different perspective on the rest of your life. If you have a lot of activities, we have relatively few here. If you're usually tied up with a lot of people, you're now with people that you're meeting for a little while, and then everybody will be going their separate ways. So there's a lot less entanglement. For people who live alone, it gives you a chance to live with people who are practicing the Dhamma, getting some perspective simply by being around them and from hearing the Dhamma as well.

That chant we had just now about the four mountains comes from a passage in the Canon where King Pasenadi, one of the major kings of that time, came to see the Buddha in the middle of the day. The Buddha asked him, "What are you coming from in the middle of the day like this? What have you been doing?" And the king was unusually frank. "Well," the king said, "I've been doing the sort of things that anybody obsessed with power would be doing – plotting, worrying about issues of state." In other words, he was basically up to no good.

The Buddha asked him, "Suppose someone were to come from the east and say there was a huge mountain moving in from the east, crushing all living beings in its way. Another reliable person comes from the south and says there's another mountain coming in from the south, crushing all living beings. Another person from the west, another from the north: Altogether there are four mountains moving in from the four cardinal directions." The Buddha then added, "Considering the fact that human life is so hard to come by, what would you do?" The king said, "What else could I do but practice the Dhamma and keep my mind calm?" The Buddha said, "I tell you. Death is coming in. You don't know which direction it's coming from, but it's coming for you. What do you think about that? What should you do?" The king said, "What else should I do but practice the Dhamma and keep my mind calm?"

In other words, the Buddha was bringing the king to his senses and teaching him the important principle of heedfulness: realizing that life is short and that what's really worthwhile in your life are your good actions—the good things you say, the good things you do, the good things you think—"good" in the sense of being skillful, leading to true happiness and not harming anybody. Those are the important things in life. We tend to forget that.

Our culture is based on heedlessness and encourages heedlessness. "Forget about the fact that you're going to die. Buy our product," they say, or "buy our

experience, or scramble over other people to gain a position,” which you’re going to have to lose. In the course of doing that, if you don’t gain the position, you’re going to get upset. If you gain it and start abusing it, you just create a lot of bad karma for yourself.

We see this sort of thing all around us—and because we’re surrounded by it, it becomes normal. It’s good to hear the Dhamma to get a sense of true normalcy. As someone once said, one of the amazing things about human beings is that we know we’re going to die yet we act like we don’t know. And it’s good to reflect on this fact. When you go to a funeral or someone around you dies, the Buddha has you reflect that you, too, are subject to the same fate. Now, he has you think about this not to get depressed or discouraged, but to remind yourself that whatever time you have remaining is valuable and you want to make the most of it.

So it’s good to reflect on your life this way: What parts of your life are really baggage weighing you down, and which parts of your life are the ones that you want to encourage that have been atrophied for too long? It’s like people who basically are told by their doctors they have eight weeks left to live, or three months, or whatever. They suddenly decide to abandon all the things that are really frivolous in their lives and focus on things that are important. Well, it’s good that they do that, but it’s a shame that they had to wait until the last couple of weeks. As Ajaan Lee liked to say over and over again in his Dhamma talks, we’re like people who will be forced to emigrate at some point, so we have to get our baggage in order to prepare for our next trip. This means sorting out your things and figuring out what you can take with you—what you *should* take with you and what’s worth leaving behind.

It’s good having this perspective on your life so you can think about what’s important, what’s not important, what missing areas have to be filled up, and what excess things can be stripped away. The best time to do that is at the end of a meditation session, because the other important thing about coming here is that you’re learning a skill. You want to spend as much time as you can in mastering this skill so that you can take it home. You can’t take the environment of the monastery back with you, but you can take the skills.

The skill we’re working on at the moment is the skill of learning how to get the mind to come to stillness, because in doing that, we gain both tranquility and some insight into the workings of our minds. That should be the main focus of your meditation: how to settle comfortably in the body, work with the breath energy in the body, so that you can really settle deeply into the present moment, get familiar with the territory here and then, once you’re here, how to stay here. It’s not all that difficult to get the mind quiet for a little bit, but you find that you

run up against a lot of other things that just are all too happy to pull you away once you get settled down.

That's where a lot of the work in the meditation is: appreciating the value of mental stillness and learning how to protect it and not let all the other thoughts interfere that keep yelling at you like insistent children, "Mommy, mommy, mommy, I've got a crisis right now." Everything for a little child is a crisis. Everything for our thoughts seems to be a crisis as well: This has to be taken care of. That has to be thought through. You have to learn how to make a distinction between what's pressing and what's important, because a lot of pressing things are not important at all, and you have to learn how to press back.

So that's the skill you want to master, but that's not the only thing you can gain from your time here. You can also stop and think about your life as a whole: where it's coming from, where it's going. The Buddha compares a person who's been meditating to someone who's up in a high tower. Or you can think about being on top of a mountain, like those of you who climbed to the top of Pala Mountain the other day. You could look out and see far in the distance: the countryside all around, things you can't see from the top of the hill here, and you can see what lies where in relationship to what—something that's hard to see when you're down in the lowlands. And it's the same when you meditate. You get a different perspective on things. You can look at your life, the path that you followed through that far landscape, and decide whether that's the path you want, whether it's going in the direction you want. What needs to be changed? The best time to do this is at the end of the meditation, after the mind has had some time to settle down and to master the skill of staying here, staying here.

There are two ways of doing this. One is if you have a particular problem in your life that you want to think through or, at least, to get some new perspective on. Pose the question before you meditate, and then put it aside. And throughout the hour, any time the question comes up, you say, "No, not yet." Put it aside; you're not ready for it. At the end of the hour, you can think about it. Just raise the issue. Sometimes it'll come up on its own. See what answers come up in the mind, what kinds of insight arise. There's no guarantee that everything that comes up in a still mind is going to be the truth, but you're in a much better position because when the mind is still like this, it's like opening all your drawers, or having access to all the drawers where you've filed things away in the mind. And something may come up. And you're in a better position to judge whether what comes up is worth following or not.

The other approach is allowing whatever's going to come up after the meditation to come up on its own, without arranging anything beforehand. Just

sit here for a while. Don't be too quick to get up and go away. Or if you do get up, just go out and sit outside on the patio and see what comes up in the mind as you try to keep it still, even as you're out there. Something interesting, something unexpected may come up. It's the unexpected insights that are the really interesting ones, the ones that help give you a new perspective on things.

Again, there's no guarantee. These are insights that you then have to put into practice to see if they really are worthwhile. But more often than not, you find that something new and helpful comes up in the mind.

So take this opportunity to get a new perspective on your life, gain a new set of skills, or perfect a set of skills that you've been working on that need a little more work. They can take you to the top of that mountain where you can see things clearly off into the distance, get a larger sense of your life, and put things into proper perspective.