

Good Traditions

January 12, 2008

Tonight we've met again in honor of Yom Khankaew, who passed away last Monday.

The Buddhist tradition is that when someone's passed away, you make merit and dedicate it to the person who's passed away. Merit is basically the name of a kind of happiness that comes from doing good. And it's important when someone has passed away, when you're thinking about them, that the current of your thoughts is a helpful current, a current imbued with merit.

As the Buddha once said, it doesn't accomplish anything to spend all your time weeping, crying. That doesn't help the person at all. What does help the person is if your mind is solid, with a sense of well-being inside. Because the whole purpose of the teaching is to teach you how to find a happiness that comes from within, that doesn't have to depend on conditions outside, so that you can maintain that sense of well-being even when conditions outside get bad.

One of the major ironies of human life is we all want happiness and yet we're in a body that ages, grows ill, and then dies. That means that if our happiness is dependent on the body, then that happiness is going to change as well. When happiness changes, it doesn't get better. It changes into something else—into pain and suffering. So we want to look into the mind for our happiness. That means we have to train the mind.

If the mind isn't trained, it's going to keep slipping outside, looking for a quick fix, looking for something easy: nice sights, nice sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, which are like junk food for the mind—food that tastes good, but doesn't give any really lasting benefit, and actually can cause harm if you get addicted to it.

So you want to look inside to develop good qualities of the mind. Generosity is one of them. The purpose of being generous is to develop a sense of kindness, a sense of wanting to help other people, realizing that you have more than enough and you're willing to share. That's a good quality of the mind. It's something you can really depend on, because the mind that's willing to share is a spacious mind. It's not the narrow, fear-driven mind of someone who's really stingy. A spacious mind is a much nicer place to stay than a narrow, confined mind.

Following the precepts is also a form of meritorious activity, in the sense that you make a promise to yourself that you're not going to harm anyone. You're not going to kill, you're not going to steal, have illicit sex, lie to anyone; you're not going to take intoxicants. This, again, is a sign of consideration for others, and it's also a sign that you're able to control your actions, to abstain from things that you know are harmful. This means developing mindfulness, it means developing alertness, to keep the precepts in mind and to watch over your activities.

As it turns out, our own activities are the major things that shape our lives. If we're not attentive to what we're doing, then the major force in life is allowed to go on in whatever way it wants. It's like turning the keys to your car over to a crazy person, someone who's forgetful, someone who doesn't know what he's doing. So you want practice in learning how to be more mindful, more alert, more sensitive to your actions and to their results—because this, again, teaches you to be self-reliant.

Then there's meditation, which focuses directly on the mind, as we're doing right now. You focus the mind on the breath: Notice how the breath feels as it's coming in; notice how it feels as it's going out. If it feels harsh or uncomfortable, you can change the way you breathe. If it feels too long or too short, you can change. Try to get sensitive to how the breathing feels inside, because it strengthens your mindfulness even more, it strengthens your alertness even more, and helps you develop qualities like concentration and discernment, all of which are necessary for training the mind so that you can see the potential for happiness that lies inside.

Even just with concentration, when the mind begins to settle down, there's a sense of ease and well-being that doesn't have to depend on things outside. Even though this is still conditioned, still not the ultimate happiness, nevertheless, it's a step in the right direction.

Then the discernment that comes from a centered and focused mind can help you see where the mind still has unskillful habits and also how to figure out ways to overcome those unskillful habits. This is how you find happiness inside.

So even though it may seem like a small thing, sitting here focusing on your breath, you develop a lot of good qualities of mind that are very useful in all areas of life—especially in getting you to look at your actions and see what their results are. It also gives the mind a sense of inner stability, a source of happiness that isn't shaken by changes outside.

Once you've developed that sense of inner stability, then when you think of loved ones who've passed away, you're not so much concerned with your own sense of loss. You're more concerned about how they're doing. You want to help, so you take the sense of well-being that you have inside and you dedicate it to them. If they're in a situation where they can learn of what you've done and they express their appreciation, that helps them.

At the same time, when a loved one has passed away, you want to stop and think about the good lessons you've learned from that person—especially people in the older generation who had a lot more powers of endurance and self-control than people do nowadays. It's good to think about what they represent. Their way of being happy is a good example to the rest of us.

All of us want happiness and yet we're so blind. We see somebody with a flashy car or a nice job and we think they must be happy. We don't really look very carefully. We don't look behind the flash to see: Does that person have an inner glow?

Grandma was a good example of someone with an inner glow. That came from doing what she knew was good, what she knew was helpful. She saw what needed to be done here in the monastery. Nobody had to tell her what to do and she didn't have to wait for anybody to

express admiration. She just went ahead and did it, with a strong sense of duty, but also with the powers of endurance and patience that she'd developed over the years.

People want to find happiness, but we keep forgetting that patience and endurance are an important part of happiness. Patience doesn't mean that you just grit your teeth and bear with things. The way to learn how to endure things is to not focus on the negative but to focus on the positive, realizing that you've got the opportunity to do good things, and that that's a rare opportunity. You don't give in to the thought that says, "I can't manage this. This is too much for me." You do what you can, and often you find that you end up doing a lot more than you thought you could. This is how your powers of endurance develop. When they're developed, and we meet up against the inevitable problems in life, the mind is strong. It doesn't waver, doesn't get displaced in the face of these things. That's why endurance is a source of happiness.

When the Buddha gave a summary of his teachings at the very beginning of his career, the first thing he talked about was patient endurance, because this is the basis for all other good qualities. On top of that, he also taught that heedfulness is the basis for all good qualities, too: realizing that your actions really are important and yet your time to do good is circumscribed. You have no idea how much longer you're going to be around.

The night before Grandma died, she looked perfectly fine. Nobody had any idea that was going to be the last time we'd see her. Even she herself, when she put the rice pot on the stove early the next morning, probably thought she was going to live until the rice was done, at least. But things didn't work out that way. When the time came for her heart to stop, she couldn't ask for a little extension at least to go back in the kitchen and turn off the stove, not even that. When the time comes to go, there's no bargaining, there's no pleading. What this means is that when you have the opportunity *now* to do good, you make the most of that opportunity, because you don't know how many more opportunities you're going to have.

So the next time you think of doing something that's a little less than honorable, or a little less than what the right thing would be, remind yourself: What would happen if you suddenly died at that point? You'd feel miserable: "My gosh, I was going something stupid and then I died!" The right way to think about death is: If you're going to die, at least die doing the right thing, doing something you can be proud of—like Grandma. She was still making merit all the way up to the end, so she could go with a clear conscience. For years, that's what she'd been doing.

So look at her life and see the example she left behind. If you look around for how happiness is found, she was a really good example. People often talk about how she seemed to beam all the time. She seemed *really* happy. It's because when she saw what needed to be done, she did it. She had the inner sense of well-being that comes from training the mind and looking for happiness in the right places. So when you think about her, think about the example that she gives to your life, what lessons you can learn from the way she lived.

We all want happiness, and we're fortunate when we have examples of people who really know how to look for happiness. It comes from developing good qualities inside. When we think about the example that she gave to us, we should also think about what kind of example we're giving to other people.

One of the things the Buddha recommended, when you see somebody's who has died, is to remind yourself, "Okay, this body has that same nature. It's going to go, too." What are you going to leave behind when you go? Make sure you leave what's best, so that we can keep up this tradition of looking for happiness in the right places.

It's a fragile tradition. People tend to forget, but it's something that the world always needs. So, it's up to us to do our part. Grandma set up a good example. Make sure that her example doesn't die. It's in this way that you show respect for her memory, and at the same time, you learn a good lesson from her life.