

## *Heedfulness Is Auspicious*

*June 10, 2021*

In Thailand, they have a series of exams for the monks, and a corresponding set of exams for laypeople. For the laypeople, they have a special text on the ceremonies for making merit. It divides merit-making ceremonies into two types: those that are auspicious and those that are inauspicious. The auspicious ones have to do with house blessings and other positive events in life; the inauspicious ones are the ones having to do with death.

With funeral services, or services over the succeeding years when you want to make merit for someone who has passed away: The idea that those ceremonies are inauspicious is not a Buddhist one, it's brahmanical. Because the Buddha said one of the highest blessings is heedfulness in terms of mental qualities, and when you go to a funeral it forces you to think heedfully. It reminds you we're all subject to death—especially when it's someone who's close.

This morning we got the news that Kridkanok Taabloka, someone I knew from Thailand—known for a long time, actually—had passed away. She was a very admirable person, very even in her moods.

Years back, when I was giving a talk as a part of a retreat, I got to the topic of generosity, dealing with right and wrong attitudes to have toward generosity, and I wanted to give an example of something that was really right. I thought of the time that we built the chedi in Wat Dhammasathit, and Nok had been there from very early on.

At that point, she was still a new student of Ajaan Fuang's. One of her good friends had invited her to come meditate a little bit with Ajaan Fuang in Bangkok. Soon after she started, the construction of the chedi began. It became obvious very quickly that we weren't going to be able to hire anybody to build it. The workers we tried hiring all ran away.

Ajaan Fuang's students in Bangkok got together and said, "Okay, we'll volunteer. We'll do the work ourselves." So she came along as well... *every* weekend. The group would gather after work Friday evening at one women's

house in Bangkok. She would provide them with a dinner. Then they'd get in a truck—one of those pickups equipped with bench-seats in the back of the truck. They'd drive out to the monastery, arriving usually around ten, eleven o'clock at night, sometimes midnight. In some cases, they'd get right to work, because there was going to be a cement pouring on Saturday night.

They would work and rest, and work and rest, pretty much around the clock, until the cement pouring. Then Sunday they'd do a little extra work, spend the night at Wat Dhammasathit, get up at 3 a.m., drive into Bangkok, and go straight to work. They kept this up for month after month for a year and a half until the chedi was done. And she was one of the regulars.

In later years, we talked about this and we would laugh. We were young at that time: We could do things like that. Now that we're getting older, there would be no way we could have done that.

Of course, now she's gone on to another lifetime, and we don't know where, but at least she has that fund of the goodness she did when she was able to. This is something that we should all take to heart: Whatever goodness we're capable of doing we should do *now* when we have the opportunity, because the opportunity is not always there.

Some people like to put things off. But what are you waiting for? When you get older, things just get harder. When you're young, you can do things that stretch you and you don't break. So stretch yourself in doing something really good.

Of course now that she's gone... she was one of the people, when I would go back to Thailand, with whom I'd sit around and reminisce about how the chedi was built. There was really a good sense of family feeling around the people who worked together on the project: people coming from all kinds of backgrounds, including a Western monk. But we were all part of the same family because we were working on something good together.

Now there's one less person who can remember. This is one of the things you get struck with as life moves on, moves on, and the years add up: how little is left of the earlier years, and how with the passage of time, fewer and fewer people are around to actually tell from their own experience what exactly happened.

I went back to Wat Dhammasathit a couple of years back, and they arranged for a young monk to greet me and take me around. We started talking, and he asked me questions: about Ajaan Fuang, about the building of the chedi and the other buildings there. So I told him what I had remembered. At the end, he said that all this was very different from what he'd heard.

So, things pass away, memories get forgotten, and there's nothing left except for the goodness you do. Of course, the badness you do can also follow you. But you want to hold on to the goodness, because we all have something bad in our background: either things we did that were not so good, or things that other people did to us. As the Buddha says, you don't want to focus on those; you want to have something better to focus on.

Of course, the building of the chedi was, as Ajaan Fuang used to say, heavy merit, whereas meditation is light merit. Light merit you can take with you wherever you go. The heavy merit has good memories, but those memories can get obscured. But if you have the skills of meditation, they can help you when you most need them.

So that's what you want to take. That's what you want to develop, and of those skills, thoughts of universal goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy and equanimity are really important. As you encounter thoughts of what things you did that were not skillful, or things that other people did to you that were not skillful, the Buddha has you think, in both cases, in larger terms.

Things that other people do to you: The Buddha would give the example of the bandits with a two handled saw, trying to saw you into pieces. He said that even in a case like that, you should not have ill-will for them; you should have goodwill instead. And starting with them, have goodwill for the whole universe. For several reasons: One is that having ill-will will pull you down. And two, if you can develop a larger sense of the whole universe as your object of thought, it pulls you out of the particularities of your own suffering.

It puts things into context: You're not the only one dying. You're not the only one in the universe being mistreated. And when you think of the larger context, of course, you think of the Buddha's second knowledge on the night of his awakening, when he saw beings passing away and being reborn in line with their

actions. You realize that those poor bandits are setting themselves up for a fall. You can actually have compassion for them as you step back from the immediate experience.

The same in cases where you've done something wrong. You learn from the Buddha that killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, taking intoxicants are all unskillful. You think back, and you may have done unskillful things like that in your life.

As he said, the proper response to those thoughts is not to get wound up in remorse. It's simply to recognize, okay, that was a mistake. You resolve not to repeat the mistake, and then you develop thoughts of goodwill again, for everybody, thoughts of compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity for all the beings in the universe.

This is partly to reinforce your determination not to repeat the mistake, and also to pull you out of that narrative. It just becomes one more instance of all the stupid things that all beings have done. When you think about the amount of suffering that's gone on, it pulls you out of the particulars of the narrative. From that perspective, you can have some compassion for yourself and for all the other beings.

And remember, in the Buddha's case when he had that second knowledge, it then led to coming back into the present moment not in terms of the narratives, but in terms of what it is that drives beings to keep on doing this again, and again, and again.

So it's advisable that you learn how to develop this larger perspective. And then think: "Where does this apply to me right now? And what can I do to get out?"

It's in this context that the Buddha discovered the four noble truths. He realized that the problem was the craving in the mind that led to all these actions that caused suffering, but also that that craving could be ended through the factors of the noble eightfold path. So he carried out the duties with regard to those four noble truths and was able to reach the cessation of suffering.

That larger perspective is helpful in many ways: It gets you out of the particulars of your narrative and gives you the ability to see, "Well, where is the problem?" Because when the Buddha had that vision of beings dying and being

reborn, it was in line with their actions. And their actions were determined by their intentions, and their intentions were shaped by their views.

Which is why he said in that verse that stands in the beginning of the Dhammapada: *The mind is the forerunner of all things*. Everything you're going to experience comes out of the mind.

So if you're really heedful, you're going to focus on the training of the mind to develop these skills. Then as aging, illness and death come, you won't do anything foolish. Before they come, you realize: You've got the opportunity to do some good both inside and outside.

When I talked to Nok shortly before she died, that's what I reminded her of. She said she had been meditating, and I told her, "Well, this is what you've got to do from now on, nothing but meditate." She said she knew that. So I encouraged her even further.

She's an example of someone who did good things for the people around her, and also made sure that she had some skills to take with her, as she faced the difficulties that we're all bound to meet in life.

So in this way, making merit for someone who's passed away can be an auspicious experience. If we learn how to look at our own lives, we realize what needs to be done: We've got to be heedful to do whatever good we can while we have the power to do it, because that goodness will provide us with support.

As the Buddha said, the goodness we've done is like relatives: When we get to the other side, that goodness will meet us and greet us, in the same way that relatives will welcome us after we've been parted for a long time.