

Recollecting the Devas

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There was a monk back in the early part of the 20th century, Kruba Srivichai, who was well-known all over northern Thailand. He sponsored many construction projects and was responsible for getting lots of temples built. Bridges were built, even the road up to Doi Suthep was built by volunteer labor under his direction. Someone once asked him why all the projects he set his mind to succeeded. He answered that it was because he chanted the Mahasamaya Sutta three times every day. The devas liked hearing it and so gave him their behind-the-scenes help with his projects.

During my early years in Thailand, I happened to hear that story. I mentioned it to Ajaan Fuang. We were about to build a chedi at the monastery, and so he asked me to chant the Mahasamaya every day, and he chanted it every day. Even though at that point he was into his 60's, he was able to memorize it. And it became the basic chant at the monastery, the theory being that the devas would offer their help to the project because they liked to hear that their names were still remembered.

That's what the Mahasamaya is: a list of all the devas who came to hear the Buddha one night. He said that almost all the devas in the universe were present. Nothing much happened, except that at one point the garudas came and saw the nagas there. They were about to swoop down on the nagas, but the Buddha forged a truce between the nagas and the garudas. So the nagas like to hear this sutta as well.

This is something we can think about in terms of the recollection of the devas—which is a meditation exercise that very few people practice. But it's a useful practice for several reasons.

One, it reminds us of the possibilities out there. People sometimes have visions when they meditate, and beings sometimes appear in the visions. If you had an impoverished cosmology like we have here in the West, you would either think that you were going crazy or that the being was either an angel or an agent of the devil. But there are many more possibilities than just that. There are all kinds of beings out there. You don't want to show them any disrespect, because if you're out in the forest and beings appear in a vision, then if they really are beings, you don't want to offend them, for they could cause you trouble. You want to treat them with good courtesy. On the other hand, though, you don't have to regard them as a force of evil and you don't have to regard them as reliable guides. They're just neighbors you want to get along with.

This is another area where the Buddha follows a middle path. Just because people have become spirits doesn't mean they know what they're talking about. And just because you can't figure out where these beings are coming from doesn't mean that they're necessarily evil. So you're polite with them, but you don't have to fear them or worship them.

Ajaan Mun offered a good example in this regard. One of his amazing accomplishments was his ability to rediscover a great deal of the practice, in many cases almost all on his own, out in the forest. An ordinary person out alone in the forest like that could easily go crazy, and yet he didn't. He had a lot of visions in his meditation—many more than his teacher, Ajaan Sao—but he realized it wasn't that he was somehow a better meditator than Ajaan Sao. It was just that he had this particular temperament and these particular problems. He regarded them as problems, but also as potentials. The biographies tell stories of how in his visions he would see devas who would come and teach him the Dhamma, tell him how he should practice, where he was lax in his observance of the rules, where he could be more precise.

For example, there's one account about when he was doing walking meditation. Devas appeared to him and said, "Now, when you're doing walking meditation, don't gaze around, looking at the scenery. You're supposed to be focusing on your mind. So try to keep your gaze controlled." He reflected that that was a good instruction, so

he gave it a try and found that it helped improve his meditation. This is the important point about how he handled those visions. It wasn't that he accepted everything he was told. Whatever he saw in the vision, he would then take it and test it, and consider whether it really was a useful principle in training the mind—whether it would make him more scrupulous, make him more observant, give better results. In those ways, the visions were a good thing. But it wasn't the case that he accepted everything that came in every vision. Otherwise, he would have gone crazy.

Ajaan Fuang was another teacher who tended to have a lot of visions. He told me many times the two main points that Ajaan Mun had told him about visions. One, when you have a vision, it's your private affair. You can talk about it with your teacher but you don't want to go talking about it with other people. Two, you have to analyze it, to see what kind of Dhamma lesson the vision is teaching. Then you have to analyze it further to figure out whether that Dhamma lesson is useful. This is the same principle we use with everything in the practice.

When you read a passage in the texts, there's no 100% guarantee that everything in the Pali Canon was said by the Buddha. So you have to test it. The Buddha himself encouraged us to test the teachings. His instructions to Gotami, his stepmother, and his instructions to Upali, the monk who was expert in Vinaya, all boil down to the fact that if you want to figure out what's really Dhamma and really Vinaya, you have to look at what kind of behavior it encourages, and what kind of results come from the behavior it encourages. If you find that it induces more passion, if it makes you hard for other people to support, or gets you entangled with other people, then it's not Dhamma, it's not Vinaya. If it leads to dispassion, to being content, to being unburdensome: That's Dhamma, that's Vinaya.

So whatever comes up in your meditation, whether it's an idea, a voice in your head, or a vision: It all has to be tested. As for visions that don't pass the test, let them go. If beings appear in the vision, you treat them with respect. You treat them with good courtesy. Wish them goodwill. This is why we chant the Mahasamaya, as an expression of courtesy, and an expression of goodwill for the devas. But the habit of extending goodwill to anyone who appears in a vision is a good habit to develop in any event. When any vision, say, of a member of your family, an old friend, anybody that you've had dealings with, appears in your meditation, wish that person goodwill, regardless of what your history is with that person. If a stranger appears in the meditation, wish that person goodwill. Then get back to your meditation object. This a good habitual attitude to develop. If the being appears powerful or angry, first fill your body with good breath energy and full awareness, as a form of protection, and then spread goodwill as an expression of harmlessness.

Another aspect of recollection of the devas is one that the Buddha recommends for people observing the uposatha precepts. He said that this uposatha we practice—the eight precepts that lay people observe on the full moon and new moon and half-moon days—are among the practices that lead to heaven. *Virtue* is one of the qualities that makes a person a deva. You can think about that in two ways. One is making you a deva after you die and the other is making you a deva while you're here now—in other words, lifting the quality of your mind.

Another quality that makes you a deva is *conviction*—in particular, conviction in the Buddha's awakening. This doesn't mean conviction just in the *fact* that the Buddha was awakened but also in the *way* he awakened: how he did it by questioning his mind and examining his mind to see what was skillful, what was unskillful, and by having the heedfulness to keep developing what was skillful and abandoning what was not. That relentless cross-questioning he imposed on himself to root out any unskillful behavior, any attachments: That's how he gained his awakening. To have conviction in that means, of course, that that's the path that you want to follow, too. Look at your behavior carefully. Do it with a sense of compassion, do it with a sense of honesty, and you're sure to benefit.

Conviction here also means conviction in the principle that you *can* develop what's skillful, you *can* abandon what's unskillful. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha emphasized repeatedly the fact that strict determinism—the idea that everything that you experience has already been determined by the past—is a very unskillful teaching. The irony, of course, is that nowadays many people think that the Buddha's teaching on

kamma is deterministic. But he went to great pains to say No.

He told the monks many times about his encounters with the Jains, his encounters with other deterministic teachers, and how, step by step by step, he refuted their teachings. It was rare for him to search out other people to refute in that way, but he saw the importance of emphasizing time and again that determinism is not the way things work. As he says, practice would be totally pointless if everything were predetermined by the past. So conviction also focuses on the principle that right now you can develop what's skillful and abandon what's not.

Another quality that makes you a deva is *generosity*. This is the beginning of right view—that there is what is given—which sounds almost too obvious to state. But you have to remember that back in the time of the Buddha the issue of generosity was a controversial one. The brahmins had been saying for centuries that generosity is fruitful, but you had to give to the brahmins for the gift to bear fruit. Other contemplative schools sprang up in reaction, saying, No, generosity doesn't bear any fruit at all, either because people's behavior is totally determined by the past, or because they just get snuffed out after death, with nothing left over—which means that it doesn't really matter whether you're generous or not, for generosity bears no long-term rewards.

So when the Buddha asserted at the very beginning of mundane right view that generosity exists, that what is given exists, he was making two statements. One is that we do have freedom of choice; and two, our actions really are fruitful. There is a long-term benefit that comes from giving. In other words, giving material things, giving your time, giving your energy—giving is good.

A fourth quality that makes you a deva is *learning*. This means listening to the Dhamma, reading the Dhamma, and memorizing what you can. This is especially important in our modern culture because there is so much in modern media that goes against the Dhamma and they have so many ways of sneaking their messages into your head. All those commercial jingles that seem to be jingling and jangling around your head when you're meditating were designed to do just that: to get stuck in your nerves.

One of the basic principles of advertising is that "True happiness is impossible to find, so you'd better find your happiness with the stuff we're selling." It takes a strong effort not to give in to that message. This is why we need to listen to the Dhamma frequently, to read the Dhamma frequently, to do our best to understand it and to bear them in mind. Reading these things doesn't mean just believing them. You think about them, you contemplate them, you question them, and then try to put them into practice to see what develops as a result. But the essential message is the same all the way through: that how you develop your mind is of utmost importance. The important things in the world are not what someone else is doing someplace else. What's important is what you're doing right here, right now.

This leads to the fifth quality that makes you a deva, which is *discernment*. Now, even though not all devas are reliable guides all the way along the path, they still have at least some discernment, at least some insight into what's skillful and what's not. That's how they got where they are. The central point in this discernment is seeing clearly what works and what doesn't work, seeing clearly how cause and effect are connected, seeing clearly how things arise and pass away in the mind so you can get a sense of what's a cause, what's an effect, what's connected, what's not. That way you can focus on the causes of suffering so you can put an end to the suffering. But again you have to look in your own mind to learn these things. You can't depend on the devas to teach you.

The Canon contains some interesting stories about interactions between monks and devas. One is about a female deva who sees a young monk right after his bath in a river. He's standing on the bank of the river wearing only his under robe, and she's attracted to him. She comes down and says, "Hey, you're wasting your time. Wait until you're old. Then you can become a monk." He says, "No, I'm not wasting my time. I'm putting my time to good use." A conversation ensues between the two of them, with a lot of Pali wordplay around the word, "time," and she's confused.

So he offers to take her to see the Buddha. She says she's never been able to get in to see the Buddha because the devas around him are too powerful. So he tells her, "I'll see what I can do to get you in." So he goes to the Buddha, with her following in his wake. The Buddha starts teaching her some really high level Dhamma and she doesn't understand a word. So he brings the level of his teaching down bit by bit, and finally, again, he says

something very refined, very profound about the training of the mind, and then asks her, "What do you understand?" She says, "I understand that giving is good. Virtue is good." That's as far as she was able to get.

So you have to watch out for devas like that. Some devas have a little bit of discernment that doesn't go very far. This is true even of the Brahmas. In another sutta a monk gains a vision of some devas in his meditation, so he asks them, essentially, "Where does the physical universe end, how far does it go?" The devas say, "We don't know, but there's another level of devas above us. Maybe they know." So he meditates some more and he sees those devas. He asks them and they reply, "We don't know either, but there's another level above us." So he gets sent up, level by level, up through the deva bureaucracy. Finally he gets to a very high level of devas and again asks them where the limits of the physical universe are. They don't know, either. "But," they say, "there is the great Brahma and sometimes he will appear in a great flash of light. So if a flash of light appears and you see him, you can ask him." Finally, as the monk meditates some more, the great flash of light appears, and there's the great Brahma. So the monk goes up to the Brahma and asks, "How far does the physical universe go? Where do earth, water, wind, and fire end?" And the great Brahma says, "I am the great Brahma, knower of all, seer of all, creator of everything that has been and will be."

Now if this had been the Book of Job, the monk would have said, "Okay, I understand. You're much greater than I am." And he would have left it at that. But this is not the Book of Job. It's the Pali Canon. The monk says, "That's not what I asked you. How far does the physical universe go?" The great Brahma says, "I am the great Brahma, knower of all, seer of all, creator of all, father of all that ever has been and will be." The monk again says, "That's not what I asked you." Finally the great Brahma takes him by the elbow, pulls him aside, and says, "Look, I don't know. But my retinue here thinks that I know everything. It'd be a great disappointment for them to hear that I didn't know something like this." So he sends the monk back down to the Buddha. The Buddha tells him, "You asked the wrong question. The question is, 'Where does the physical universe find no footing?'" And the reply is consciousness without surface or consciousness without feature: the consciousness of the awakened one. So even the great Brahma has limits on his discernment.

But this doesn't mean that the devas are all ignorant. There's another story about a monk living in the forest. He goes down to a pond of water to bathe and bends over to sniff a lotus growing in the pond. A deva appears suddenly and says, "Hey, you just stole the scent of that flower." And the monk basically says, "Oh, come on, that's not stealing." The deva replies, "Look, for anyone who really wants to purify his mind, even the slightest fault should appear as large as a cloud." In those days, a cloud that covers the whole sky was the largest thing imaginable. The monk comes to his senses and replies, "Well, gee, I guess you're right. Thank you for informing me. And if you see me making other mistakes like that again, please let me know." But the deva says, "I'm not your servant. You should look after yourself." And she disappears.

So visions like this might happen in your meditation. It doesn't happen only in Asia. I know people who, especially here in the Southwest, have had lots of visions when they go to places like Bryce, Zion, or Arches—spirits of Indians, the coyote god, a lot of spirits corresponding to Native American legends. Some of these meditators have no knowledge of Native American legends, yet they see many of the same things. So it's good to remember the basic principle for how you treat devas. You recollect their virtues. You treat them with respect. And then you take what you learn from them and you put it to the test to see if it really is conducive to training the mind.

As for the recollection of the virtues of the devas, that's useful if you want to raise the level of your mind here in present life. You don't have to wait until you become a deva. Ajaan Suwat *did* make a statement once, saying that when you're thinking about your next life, don't make a determination to come back as a human being. The human world is going to go through a lot of difficulties. It'd be better to take rebirth as a deva. The belief that devas can't practice is not true. There are lots of devas who practice. If they get the opportunity to hear the Dhamma, they can even gain the noble attainments.

But for right now, focus on those deva virtues right here. How do you make your mind a deva mind right now? How do you make your actions deva actions? Focus right now on conviction, generosity, virtue, learning,

and discernment, regardless of whether you have visions or not. And that way recollection of the devas really can raise the level of your mind.