

Opportunities Everywhere

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When you think about the Buddha's last words, it's striking that he didn't talk about nibbana, didn't talk about emptiness, not-self, dependent co-arising, any of the really famous teachings. He started with a warning, "Fabrications are inconstant, subject to arising and passing away. Achieve completion through heedfulness."

In other words, he was talking about an attitude, an attitude you bring to the practice, realizing that things slip away, slip away very quickly. And you've got work to do. You can't be complacent.

If you let yourself be complacent, all the opportunities to improve the mind, to develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones get lost. And you can't call them back.

At the moment of death, this is probably one of the biggest regrets for a lot of people: all the good that they could have done but they didn't do.

So you want to make sure you're a person with no regrets. There are two ways of doing that. The unskillful way is to just be really stubborn and say, "Well, I don't regret anything at all," and go into huge denial. The other way is to look around you right now to see what opportunities there are for working on the perfections, working on all the other good qualities that need to be developed.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about how much more merit there is in meditation than in the precepts and how much more merit there is in the precepts than in generosity, but you can't really get anywhere in meditation without generosity or the precepts. These are necessary; these are part of the foundation. They develop the qualities you need for meditation.

Generosity, for instance: You realize that to gain anything in life, you have to be willing to put something out, to go out of your way. This is one of the reasons why, when the Buddha described the very first level of right view, mundane right view, he brought up the issues of generosity and gratitude. Gratitude is when you realize other people have gone out of their way for you, and you appreciate what a huge change it's made in your life.

So the question is, are you just going to feed off of the generosity of others, the kindness of others? Or are you going to share some food with other people so that you can be a benefactor as well?

There's even a place where the Buddha said that you can't really attain the higher attainments if you're stingy. So it's good to think about the different

opportunities you have for generosity, both outside and inside.

I was reading an article in a newsletter one time. A Western monk had been in Thailand and at the very beginning of his time there he'd looked around and saw all the Thai monks and nuns puttering around here and there in the course of the day. He said, "Ah, these are wasting their time. They should be doing nothing but meditating." So that's what he tried to do, but as he focused solely on meditating, he began to find his mind was drying up.

Now, Theravada does have that reputation for being selfish, but you look around the Theravadin countries, and there are very generous people. So he began to realize that his preconceived notion about the practice had to be changed. He found that there's kind of a juice that comes from puttering around and helping a little bit here, cleaning up there, seeing a weed here and there and picking it as you walk past on the road, lending a helping hand when you can. It develops a quality of mind. You realize that you're not here just for yourself. There are opportunities all around.

Ajaan Fuang used to call this "the grass at the corral gate." There was a time when he found some garbage that someone had left in the monastery. Ajaan Fuang pointed it out to a visiting woman and said, "Don't you see the grass at the corral gate?" She said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Right there. There's some very easy merit right there for the picking."

If you look around, there are opportunities all the time. That way, you develop the quality of diligence: That's an important part of the practice. Diligence is different from heedfulness. Heedfulness is the motivating factor, the wisdom that sees that "I don't have much time, I want to do what good I can." Diligence is when you actually carry through.

Of course, we all know the dangers of allowing the daily work schedule to squeeze out your meditation. But don't let the meditation squeeze out the other good you can do as well. You want to nourish the whole heart and the whole mind. And part of that nourishment comes from generosity, gratitude, being very careful in your actions and looking for all the little opportunities there are to be helpful around the place.

Then you can carry those qualities into your meditation, because an important aspect of the practice when you're trying to develop concentration and discernment is seeing the little weeds in the mind and uprooting them along the way. They may not be the big issues you've read about in the books, but wherever there's a little bit of defilement, you want to take care of it if you can.

That quality of heedfulness then moves deeper and deeper inside, always looking for the opportunity to make things better: to improve your mindfulness,

to improve your alertness, to get quicker and quicker about noticing when the mind is about to move off into another world, catching yourself so that you don't go jumping into the balloon along with it. You can see the balloon float away and then it'll just—it's not really a balloon, it's more like a bubble—it'll just pop in the air. And you're not put to any trouble because it popped. You're not finding yourself dropping down to the ground—which would have been the case if you'd been in the bubble.

So this ability to notice a lot of little things and to realize that a lot of the practice is in the little things is an important aspect of heedfulness. After all, you don't want to have to wait until greed, aversion, and delusion are really big and have moved in and claimed their space in your mind before you do something about them. You want to catch them when they're just little tiny seeds, little tiny weeds, and uproot them right then and there.

Like those burr plants we have around the monastery: They're a lot easier to weed in the spring when they're tender and haven't produced their burrs. Of course, they have these nice little white flowers that seem so endearing—but you can't be heedless. As the summer wears on, they turn into burrs. If you walk through them, you've got a huge mess: in your clothes and, if there's any hair on your legs, in that, too. It's because you were careless when things were small.

It's this willingness to look for the small things: that's going to carry you through a lot of issues. It keeps you in a proactive mode so that you're not just reacting to things as they come up but you're actively looking for opportunities to do some good, whether it's outside or inside. And you find the opportunities exist in a lot of places where you wouldn't have expected them.

Sometimes, though, you get sick and you say, "Okay, that's it for the meditation now while I'm sick." Well, there are actually opportunities while you're sick: little places you can look to gain at least a toehold with mindfulness and alertness to take the breath that you've been working with and see what it can do for your disease.

The patterns that Ajaan Lee gives in his seven steps were actually formulated when he was recovering from a heart attack. You look at how he taught breath meditation over the years after that, and you'll see that he would change his ways of describing the levels of breath in the body, the directions of the breath would flow, different ways of conceiving the breath. All this came from his willingness to use the breath to deal with whatever diseases he had.

So when illness comes up, say, "Okay, here's your opportunity to explore how the breath can be used when you're ill." You learn new tricks about the breath, areas of breath energy not only in the body but around the body that you can

make use of.

Ajaan Lee talks about the breath as being a connector to other elements outside of the body. That's something you can explore when you're sick. You don't have to wait until you're sick, of course, but the opportunity is still there.

In other words, if you look for opportunities, you'll find them. Even when you're dying, there are opportunities. There are cases in the Canon of people who gained awakening at the moment of death. They didn't just give up and say, "Well, that's it," and let themselves get sucked down the tubes wherever the tubes would lead them. Here's an opportunity. Things come crowding in: memories, regrets, anticipations.

And one of the lessons you should learn is that you can be proactive. You're not just a victim of whatever comes at you. You can look for the opportunities to do something right—to remember that the mindfulness you've developed, the alertness you've developed, whatever clarity of mind you've developed: You can bring them to bear.

This is where they really show their stuff. Everything else you've learned in life is going to leave you at that point. All the knowledge of the doctors: It's going to be useless then. The body's *going*.

The subjects you've learned, the things you studied in school, experiences you had in this life: They may come crowding in, but they're not going to be all that helpful.

The things that'll be helpful are the good qualities you've developed in the mind, the understanding you've developed about how the mind creates states of becoming: again, more of those balloons. At that particular point, it's going to be especially serious because if you get in a particular balloon, you might find yourself in a whole other body in a whole other birth.

So you have to remember that you can choose. Some of your thoughts may seem really pressing, but you don't have to give in just because they're insistent.

There are always opportunities to sidestep suffering, to sidestep unskillful mental states. This is probably one of the most important teachings: that regardless of how bad a situation may be, at least you always have the freedom to choose to do something skillful, even if it simply means abstaining from some unskillful things—and even if it means making a lot of sacrifices. But what you've sacrificed is not lost if it's for the sake of what's skillful.

So developing this quick eye—quick to see opportunities and to take advantage of them. It starts with little things and builds up to the big ones.

That's the kind of quality you want to develop, that's the quality that counts as heedfulness and that can bring the practice to completion.

So be on the lookout for whatever chances you have—whether it's one of the more basic qualities of the mind or one of the more refined qualities of the mind—it's all good. And it's all part of the practice.