

Treasures Beyond Death

July 1, 2011

Breathe in, breathe out. It's the breath that keeps us alive. While we have it, let's make the most use of it—because it's not always going to be there.

This is the basic message of the Buddha's teachings on heedfulness. When someone has passed away, on the one hand, we do what we can to honor the memory of the person who's passed away; but then we also have to reflect back on ourselves, that the same thing is going to happen to us someday, and will we be prepared?

In Thailand, one of the standard textbooks on the Dhamma discusses the various ceremonies marking the stages of life. It divides ceremonies into two types: auspicious and inauspicious. Any ceremonies having to do with a person's passing away are said to be inauspicious ceremonies or ceremonies dealing with inauspicious events. But that's more a Brahmanical way of approaching the ways we mark the passing of a person. The Buddhist way is to learn how to become heedful, and to be heedful is something very auspicious.

As the Buddha said, it's one of the blessings of life is to be heedful: to realize on the one hand that there is aging, illness, and death in life, there's separation in life: this happens to us, it happens to all people, all beings everywhere; but on the other hand, there is the possibility for true happiness. This comes through our decisions, our freedom to choose. This is why we often repeat those five reflections, "I'm subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation." Those thoughts give rise to a sense of samvega, particularly when you expand them the way the Buddha has you expand them, which is that you're not the only one, everybody everywhere is subject to these things.

But then there's the fifth reflection: "I'm the owner of my actions, heir to my actions. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir." That's the reflection that gives you confidence that there is a way out of this suffering through your own choices, through your own actions.

Where do the actions come from? They come from the mind. And they make a big difference. Either they keep you spinning around in this cycle of death and rebirth—and more death and redeath and rebirth—or they can be the type of action that gets you out, what the Buddha calls the action that leads to the ending of action. That's what his path is.

He says that if you reflect simply on the fact that *I am* subject to aging, illness and death, and *I am* the owner of my actions, this gives rise to a sense of heedfulness, that you don't want to do anything unskillful. But if you reflect on the universality of all this, it goes deeper. These things are true for everybody everywhere. That reflection, he says, is what gets you on the path. And being on the path is a very auspicious thing.

The tradition is that as you practice the path you're not the only person who benefits. The merit also goes to your parents, to other people who've taught you, who've helped you in the past. It's a sign of their goodness living on in you, and you're taking it as far as you can. This is why it's traditional at the time of a passing to make merit in various ways: to be generous, to practice the precepts, and in particular to meditate. It's in the training of the mind that you'll be able to firm up your intention, and then strengthen your resolve to actually act on that intention to do only what is skillful—and to think of skillfulness in its highest sense, i.e., the skills of the path, starting with right view and going on through right concentration.

So as we're meditating tonight, on the one hand it's in honor of <name>. But it's also a reflection on our own position. He's taught us this lesson: We live this life, we do our best, but then the body just keeps wearing out. It doesn't ask anybody's permission. It doesn't warn you, "I'm going to wear out this time or that time." At that point, all you have are the results of your past actions to take with you. So what kind of actions are you going to take?

The Buddha says that if you take unskillful ones with you, they're like a cart drawn by an ox. They're very heavy. If you take skillful ones with you, they're like a shadow that follows you: They don't weigh anything at all. You don't have to do anything at all. They just go with you wherever you go.

At the very least, you want to go to a place where you can continue practicing. At best, you want to get out of the cycle entirely, because the cycle's pretty uncertain. Sometimes you go to a really good place and you get complacent: Things are easy, things are nice, and you start taking them for granted. Your effort in the practice begins to go slack. Even if it doesn't, there's always more aging, illness, and death waiting for you. We've been through this many, many times.

You've probably heard the sutta where the Buddha asks the monks, "Which is greater, the tears you've shed through the loss of a father, loss of a mother, loss of a sister, loss of a brother, a husband or wife, son or daughter, these many, many lifetimes, or the water in the oceans?" And the answer is the tears. Think about that the next time you drive up Interstate 5 and look out across the ocean. You've shed more tears than all the oceans of the world. All you see as you go up the coast is one little sliver of the ocean and there's already an awful lot of water in that sliver.

There's another sutta where the image is even more graphic. A group of monks came to see the Buddha one time and he posed the question to himself, "What could I teach these monks so they'd all become arahants right here, right now as they're sitting here?" So he asked them, "Which do you think is greater, the amount of blood you've shed having your heads cut off in various lifetimes, or all the water in the oceans?" And again, the answer is the blood. When you had your head cut off when you were cows; when you were sheep; when you were pigs; when you were human beings but you were captured for having been thieves or highway robbers or having engaged in adultery: In each of those ways of having your head cut off, he

said, the blood is more than all the water in the oceans. The monks all became arahants listening to that.

This is what's auspicious about marking someone's passing: You get to reflect on your own life. Where is it going? What are you hoping to accomplish in this lifetime? What are your priorities? If you can order them well, that's auspicious.

There are treasures that we can take with us. They're not our material possessions, they're not our relationships with one another—although the fact that we've had interaction with other people usually tends to influence us to have more interactions with those same people when we meet them again the next time around. That can be for good or for evil.

There was once a case where a nun was studying meditation with Ajaan Fuang and she wanted to go to a quieter place. He was at Ajaan Lee's monastery, Wat Asokaram, and it was pretty busy because there were a lot of people. So she went off to a smaller branch monastery. It turned out that as she was meditating, visions came into her meditation that the abbot of that branch monastery had been her husband in a previous lifetime, and they'd loved each other very much. It so happened he had the same visions in his meditation. So they both disrobed and got married, to try to pick up where they left off. Well, for some reason, this time around it didn't work. They had eight kids. They separated eight times. When I saw the woman in her old age, she was one of the most miserable-looking people I'd ever seen. So it's not necessarily the case that a good relationship stays good the next time around.

What does stay good, though, are the wealth you build into the mind. The Buddha lists seven treasures altogether. The first is conviction: conviction in the fact that the Buddha was awakened, along with the implications of that conviction, which come down to the fact that true happiness is possible and it can be attained through human efforts. It doesn't require supernatural abilities, just taking the abilities you have now and developing them. That conviction is a treasure because it encourages you to focus on your actions and not underestimate the powers you have. It's an empowering conviction.

The remaining treasures have to do with avoiding unskillful behavior and developing skillful behavior. The next three deal with unskillful behavior. You develop virtue, which you make up your mind that you're not going to harm yourself or anyone else through your actions or your words. Then there's a sense of shame, which is not being ashamed of yourself. It's just realizing that if the idea of an unskillful action or doing an unskillful action comes into the mind, you'd be ashamed to follow through with it. This kind of shame is actually part of high self-esteem. Then there's compunction, the realization that if you do something unskillful, it may not show its bad results now, but somewhere down the line you're going to suffer from it, you're going to be placing limitations on yourself, and you realize you'd rather not do that. These three qualities are treasures because they keep you from doing things that you'd later regret.

That right there is huge treasure. Sometimes you hear people talking about things they've done in the past: people who've been in war or acted in other ways where they did something they knew was wrong, and then that memory sticks with them for years and years and years afterwards. As many of them say, they would give any amount of money to go back and undo what they did. Well, no amount of money can do that for you. But the treasures of virtue, compunction, and shame can prevent you from doing those things to begin with. So they can do something for you that money can't do at all.

When you have virtues that you hold to regardless, they're a very strong treasure. You're giving universal protection to everybody else, in that you're not going to harm them, and you get a share in that universal protection as well. Someone can come and offer you a million dollars to lie, say, and you don't accept it—which means that your virtue is more valuable than a million dollars. So this is how these three ways of avoiding unskillful behavior are treasures.

Then there are three types of skillful behavior: One is learning the Dhamma; the next is generosity; and the last is discernment. Learning the Dhamma's a treasure in that it puts signposts in your mind. You have guidance in your mind that will hold you in good stead when things get rough. When you face a difficult situation, you can remember, say, what the Buddha said or what one of the great ajaans said about what to do in situations like that. And the fact that the person saying those things wasn't just saying it but actually lived that truth gives you the courage to hold by it, stick with it. You find that you can get through a lot of really bad situations because you have that knowledge. And it primes you to make it your own knowledge, not just something you picked up from other people. You learn to test it on your own to see that, Yes, it's true. Following the Dhamma does lead to happiness.

Then there's generosity. Generosity's a treasure in several ways. On the one hand, just the karmic effects of being generous with your things, being generous with your time, with your forgiveness, treating people fairly: All of these things come back to you in the way other people will treat you. But even more than that, the fact that you've developed a generous mind means you've got a spacious mind, one that's concerned not only with its own narrow little concerns but can take a larger view.

It's like walking down a path at night. If you're just concerned about your own personal immediate needs, it's like walking down the path with a tiny little flashlight. You flash your flashlight around and you can see some things, but a lot of things you miss. Your comprehension of the situation is a lot narrower than it would be, say, during the daytime. But if you take other people's needs into view, it's as if lots of people are walking down the path together and everybody has a flashlight. You're going to see a lot more.

And as the Buddha once said, a stingy person can't attain jhana; a stingy person can't attain the noble attainments. So generosity's absolutely basic to the path.

Finally there's discernment: the ability to see what's skillful, what's not. You realize that this is an important issue: the ability to see where there's suffering, what's causing the suffering, how

you can put an end to that, and the path of practice that you would follow to put an end to that. You realize that this is *the* most important issue in life because this is the one issue we can solve that will put an end to this constant rebirth and redeath, rebirth and redeath, over and over again. You look carefully at where there's stress in your life; you develop the qualities of mind that enable you to look and understand this process of suffering. Why is it that everything we do is for the sake of happiness but we keep on causing suffering? What's wrong? What are we missing? You want to look into that.

Otherwise, you keep causing suffering not only for yourself but also for the people around you, the people you love, everybody. It's through our own lack of skill that there's so much suffering in the world. You can't make other people skillful, but you can work on your own skills: developing qualities of mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment. As you learn how to master the duties of the path as skills—comprehending the suffering until you understand it; when you see what's causing it, you let that go; you develop the factors of the path so that you can realize the cessation of suffering: That's the greatest treasure there is. That's what enables you to stop creating the suffering that you've been inflicting on yourself and others for who-knows-how-long.

So these are your real treasures. You want to make sure that, as you face the end of your life, you have these treasures with you—because if you're not developing these treasures, what kind of qualities are you developing? It's the qualities of mind that you take with you. You don't want to have to open up your baggage and see that there's nothing but rocks inside. You want look inside and find gold. That way you can travel far.

The quality that underlies all these treasures is the quality of heedfulness. As the Buddha said, all skillful qualities of the mind come from being heedful. He never said the mind was inherently good or inherently bad. If you think your mind is inherently good, you tend to get complacent: Any ideas that come up in the meditation have got to be good. That belief can lead you far, far astray. If you believe you're inherently bad, then there's nothing you can do for yourself. You've got to get somebody else's help. So the Buddha never talked about inherent goodness or inherent evil. What he did talk about was the fact that we all desire happiness and yet we cause suffering, but we don't have to. We do have that choice, but it's up to our ability to train the mind. This is why heedfulness leads to skillfulness.

We work on developing the skills of the mind so that ultimately those skills can lead to release. And that's the heartwood of the teachings, i.e., the really solid core, the part that matters the most. That's where the Buddha's teachings are aimed. As you look at your life, you can ask yourself, "Do you want to aim at that too?" The possibility is there.

The alternative would be to go through this process of aging, illness, death, and separation over and over and over again. As the Buddha said, you see someone who's extremely poor: You've been there before. You see someone who's been extremely rich: You've been there

before. All the various kinds of loss and wealth: You've experienced them all. What more do you want?

If there are things that you really desire in life, especially sensual pleasures, as Ajaan Fuang once said, it's a sign that you had those in a previous lifetime and now you miss them. You want to get them back. But of course, if you get them back you're going to have to be separated from them again, and then you'll miss them again.

So as we reflect on the people we've loved when they pass away, on the one hand, we want to do something to honor them; but on the other hand, we have to realize that we have our own lives that we have to care for. What lessons can we learn from this? The primary one is that you really want to look at where your life is going—and what you're doing with it while you have it. This ability to focus on the breath, this ability to train the mind: Where do you want to take that? The choice is yours.