

## *Solid in the Face of Death*

*August 25, 2013*

Choose a good place to put your mind. It can be with the breath, thoughts of goodwill, repeating *Bud-dho*, or visualizing the parts of the body. The choice is up to you, because you're looking for a place where the mind can *stay* and feel engaged. You're also looking for an antidote.

Sometimes with sleepiness, just repeating the word *buddho-buddho-buddho* rapid-fire helps keep you awake. Or if your mind is drifting and complacent, you can think about death. It's something we don't like to think about, but it's all around us. And it should serve as a reminder. We're not meditating on death to get depressed or discouraged; we're just reminding ourselves that this is what happens to everybody and its very unpredictable.

Yesterday I was visiting a young man who's dying of cancer. He's got a death sentence on him. But who knows? Any of us might die before him. We don't come with an expiry date. Some people actually die in the womb or at the moment of birth. We've been fortunate enough to get out and have some time in the world. And the extent to which you have any time, you're fortunate—if you use it well. As the Buddha said, one day of insight, one day of mindfulness, one day of concentration, is better than a thousand years lived without insight, mindfulness, or concentration.

Of course, none of us are going to have a thousand years of anything—at least not in this lifetime. And as I said, death can come at any time; illness can come at any time, striking you down, making it difficult to practice. So you've got the opportunity right now. That's why death is one thing you might want to think about, to help the mind settle down and get to work right now.

Ajaan Lee often talks about getting the mind to settle down not so much with a sense of ease but from what the Buddha calls *samvega*, which can mean a sense of urgency or a sense of terror. When you look at the world around you, you realize it's trying to kill you. That year we had the big fire off on the eastern horizon and the whole hillside looked like a big glowing barbecue grill: The first thought that went through my mind was, "Nature is trying to kill us." We're afraid these days of all the chemicals and other unnatural things in our air, our water, and our food that could kill us, but we tend to forget that we often die of natural causes. Death is a natural thing.

That insight the Buddha had during the second watch on the night of his awakening: He saw all the beings in the universe dying and being reborn, based on

their actions. The take-away he took from that was actually two things. One was that it suggested an answer to the question, “What determines how people are born?” And the answer was: their actions, which are shaped by their intentions and their views. The other take-away, of course, was a sense of samvega—that the cycle just keeps going on and on and on. It’s huge: the entire universe. More than 200,000 people are dying each day here, just here on Earth. Who knows what’s happening with other beings in other realms and on other planets around other stars. That’s a lot of death. And even so, we keep coming back for more.

As it says in the chant we repeated just now, we’re slaves to craving. We never seem to get enough. The story goes that Ratthapala, the monk, was talking to King Koravya about the reasons why he had ordained. He cited four Dhamma summaries, and they were all about the facts of aging, illness, and death. The world is swept away—that’s aging. It offers no shelter, there’s no one in charge—that’s illness. You can’t tell other people to share your illness or take it from this person and give it to that person so that the first person gets relieved. The world has nothing of its own—that’s the fact of death. And yet we keep coming back. That’s the fourth Dhamma summary: We’re slaves to craving.

The king wanted that one explained, so Ratthapala asked him, “Suppose there was a kingdom off to the east with lots of wealth, lots of women, lots of all the kinds of things a king would want, and it didn’t have much of an army. Your army could conquer it. What would you do?” The king said “Well, I’d take it.” Here’s the king, 80 years old already, and he wants another kingdom. “How about if there were a kingdom to the south... or the west... or to the north in the same situation?” And the king would take those as well. “How about if there were another kingdom on the other side of the ocean?” He’d go for that too. This shows how insatiable the human mind is. It keeps coming back for more and more of the same old stuff despite all the suffering involved.

When you take a larger view like this, it’s a way of taking some of the burden off the mind caused by the personal problems of your daily life. You realize that you’re not suffering alone. Everybody is suffering. It seems paradoxical, but it’s true that thinking about the fact that it’s not just you makes it a lot easier to bear the burdens that you do have to bear. If it were just you, it would seem unfair: “Why me?” Even though we know that everybody else has suffering of one sort or another, there’s still that question, “Why me?” And the answer is, “Because it’s not just you; it’s the same for everybody. You’re part of everybody.” This gives something of a relief from the particulars of your suffering.

But the general fact of suffering can still get overwhelming. There’s so much all around us. This is why the Buddha, in the third watch of the night, inclined his

mind to find a way out. He saw that it lay in mastering the four noble truths, which meant looking straight at the issue of suffering. In particular, he was looking to see what the mind is doing that keeps it coming back, back, back to suffer even more.

So on the one hand, depersonalizing it helps make it all easier to bear. When it's easier to bear, you can look at it with a lot more equanimity and see, "What are the general patterns here? How can I get a handle on the fact that there is suffering here and I can relieve it?" Part of the answer lies in realizing that you're adding unnecessary suffering on top of the pain that's already there. That's the motor that keeps things going. As the Buddha said, you have to comprehend the suffering so that you can let go of the cause. And it's not easy to comprehend the suffering until you get the mind quiet. Once it's quiet, that too helps you to bear a lot of the burdens. As the mind gets a lot more still, there's a sense of well-being coming from within. You're not so strung out by the particulars of your suffering.

You find there are resources inside you that you can develop. When the mind settles down and gets still, there's a sense of ease. You can spread that ease through the body. This is a really important part of the skill. It's one of the reasons why the Buddha didn't teach a totally one-pointed-to-the-exclusion-of-all-else kind of concentration. His concentration was more broadly based. You think of the breath coming in and out through the whole body, nourishing all the cells throughout the body, nourishing the nerves, nourishing the blood vessels and blood in the vessels—all the different organs of the body. You realize that you've got a resource here you haven't developed properly.

It's learning like that you have a gold vein under your house. Simply knowing it's there can give you a sense of security, but even more so when you dig down and find it. The breath element in the body does help in this way. It's the aspect of our inner sense of the body that can be used to adjust all the other aspects: the warmth, the sense of coolness, the sense of heaviness that tell us that we've got a body. As your awareness seeps throughout the body in this way, it too gets refreshed.

When you're refreshed, that's when you can begin to look at the suffering within you and around you, and deal with it with a lot more skill. You're not quite so much in the line of fire. You can step out a bit. Sometimes it might seem like you're being unfaithful to other people when you're not in the line of fire along with them, but that's actually not the case. You're helping them by stepping aside a bit. You can be a source of strength for them, at the same time that you're a source of strength for yourself. We all take turns. There are times when we have to depend on other people and times when other people have to depend on us. It's

helpful in both cases if you learn how to master those skills that are referred to in the chant on goodwill: “May I look after myself with ease.” “May all beings look after themselves with ease.”

If you’re more competent in looking after your mind, then no matter how bad the body gets and how much of a burden the body is on you and other people, the fact that your mind is in good shape takes a huge weight off of everybody: you and the people around you. And when you’re the person who has to give the help, the fact that your mind is in good shape means that you’re not placing the burden of your grief or your own personal feelings on the people you’re helping.

So these are some very important skills we’re working on here, as we train the mind to be still and to stay concentrated in order to develop that sense of well-being here and now so that it doesn’t have to depend on things outside.

One of the classical images of a person fully awakened is of a stone pillar, sixteen spans tall, eight of those spans buried in the rock of a mountain, so that no matter how much the wind blows from whichever direction, the pillar doesn’t shiver or shake. When you have a mind like that, then other people can lean on you and it’s no problem for you. You give them something secure to lean on, and you’re not going to fall over. Ajaan Lee’s image is of a wheel that spins around but there’s something in the center of the hub of the wheel that doesn’t spin. That’s the pillar.

So samsara can spin around, our lives spin around, but try to find that quality in the mind that doesn’t spin, that stands solid and tall. You do this both so that it can be its own support and so that other people can lean on you whenever necessary.