

An Auspicious Day

January 28, 2015

In Thailand there's a textbook that divides religious ceremonies into two types: auspicious and inauspicious. According to the book, auspicious ones are where you're giving blessings to make people happy; inauspicious ones have to do with death—either a funeral or the making of merit years after the funeral. That's actually a brahmanical idea. The brahmins had lots of taboos around funerals, and many Thai people have picked them up. Some people, after they go to a funeral, will sprinkle their heads with water before they enter the house. While they're at the funeral, they'll chant a little chant to themselves to protect themselves from pollution.

This has nothing to do with the Buddha's teachings. In fact, in his list of auspicious blessings the Buddha lists being heedful with regard to all phenomena. That's a blessing, something auspicious. Funerals and reflecting on death in general are things that help us be heedful, so they're actually auspicious in this sense—if we make them auspicious for ourselves.

I just got news this morning that an old friend from Thailand, someone who was not that much older than I am, passed away from a stroke yesterday. Of course, there's always one thing about deaths if they're 10, 20, 30 years older than you are. They don't seem that close. But as they're getting closer and closer to your age, you begin to realise that it's creeping up on you—which is a heedless way of thinking. After all, death doesn't come only to old people. Some babies die in the womb or at birth. Little children die, teenagers die, young adults die. And, as they say, death doesn't give a sign ahead of time to say so many more days until death. So we have to be prepared all the time.

You probably know the story of the time when the Buddha was telling the monks that they had to be heedful, to think about death, not as a discouragement but as an encouragement to the practice. Some of the monks said, “Yes I think about death once a day,” or “I think about death twice a day.” It finally got down to two monks, one saying, “I think about death each time I breathe in and breathe out, telling myself, ‘May I live to breathe this breath so that I can practice,’” the other was saying, “While I’m eating, I think, ‘May I live to have one more mouthful of food and during that time I will practice getting rid of unskillful states of mind, developing skillful ones.” And the Buddha said that only those last two monks counted as heedful.

So you want to be alive to the fact that death can come at any time. That’s what happens to life. And it’s interesting that when the Buddha’s talking about the present moment, one, he doesn’t say it’s a wonderful place to be and, two, he doesn’t say you stay there just to hang out. Instead, he has you focus on the present moment because it might be your last moment and there’s work to be done. That’s what present-moment contemplation is for.

In the sutta on the auspicious day, he talks about not hankering after the future and not going after the past but seeing clearly what’s happening right there, right there, there in the present moment. Some people stop there and say, “Here’s the Buddha telling us just to be in the present moment.” But the passage goes on and says, “Whatever duty you have to do, do it now, ardently.” In other words, you focus on the present moment because that’s where you do your duties with regard to the four noble truths. If you’re going to comprehend stress, you’re going to comprehend it in the present moment. If you’re going to abandon the cause, you abandon it in the present moment. If you’re going to develop the path, you develop it in the present moment. Ultimately, when you realise the cessation of suffering, that’s going to be something happening in the present moment, too.

And it doesn’t just happen on its own by hanging out. It happens because you realise there are duties that need to be done. This is why we practice mindfulness. Again, there’s a misunderstanding that mindfulness means being in the present moment with a nice, spacious, non-judgemental awareness. The Buddha never defines it that way. In fact, he defines it as a quality of your memory, being able to keep things in mind. It’s your active memory: not just sitting around thinking about things in the past, but remembering lessons from the past that you can apply to the present moment.

You combine that with alertness—in other words, seeing what you’re actually doing and the results of what you’re doing. Alertness, too, is not an open, spacious awareness of everything all around you. It’s focused. It’s focused on your actions, focused on events as they’re happening in the mind, and seeing their results.

And then you want to be ardent. In other words, you put your whole heart in doing your duties, as mindfulness reminds you, in the context of the different frameworks it provides.

Take those lists of feelings in the Satipathana Sutta. There are feelings of pleasure, feelings of pain, feelings of neither pleasure nor pain. There are pleasures of the flesh and pleasures not of the flesh; pains of the flesh, pains not of the flesh; feelings of neither pleasure nor pain of the flesh and not of the flesh. If you look at the list superficially, it looks like a list of the possible feelings that could just come and go, and you’re just there, aware of them. But when you look elsewhere in the suttas, you see that the Buddha says that certain pleasures are to be avoided and others are to be pursued. Certain pains are to be avoided and others are to be pursued. And the same with feelings of neither pleasure nor pain. The Buddha says not to impose or inflict unnecessary pain on ourselves, but if we see that, by following a certain pleasure, unskillful states arise in the mind, you’ve got to abandon that pleasure.

Some pains can lead to unskillful states in the mind, too, so that’s a kind of pain you want to not focus on—or you have to learn how to focus on it in the right way. Instead of identifying with it and seeing that you’re made to suffer by it, you can ask yourself, “How am I making myself suffer around the pain?” That’s a useful approach to the pain.

The same with feelings of equanimity. Even equanimity can be unskillful at times, so you have to be alert to when it should be developed and when it shouldn’t.

You have to remember to look at these feelings as events, as part of a causal process, realising that you’re doing a lot of the fabricating. Pains don’t just happen; pleasures don’t just happen. An element of intention goes into them. And you have to remember that, so that if you see that unskillful fascination with a particular kind of pain is coming up, you have to look to find the intention that went into it.

Mindfulness reminds you of what to look for. Alertness helps you to look and see causal connections between the pain, say, and a state of mind. Ardency is what’s heedful. It reminds you that if you don’t abandon the unskillful mind states, there’s going to be trouble down the line.

This is why contemplation of death is a useful part of mindfulness practice. It helps keep you ardent, and ardency is the expression of discernment in these three qualities. You can be mindful of all kinds of things, alert about all kinds of things, but if you're not ardent about doing something about them, you're not really wise. You may have all kinds of knowledge stored away, but if you don't have that sense of urgency—that something's got to be done, that I'm responsible for my experiences to some extent and the extent to which I am, I want to do it well—then everything is just a loss. The pleasures you have just go, go, go. They wash away, wash away.

Ajaan Suwat used to like to ask, "Those sensual pleasures you had last week, where are they now?" You can't call them up; you can't bring them back. You can bring back a memory, but there's no guarantee that a memory of a past pleasure is going to be a pleasant memory. Sometimes it brings pain with it, especially if you had to do something unskilful around that pleasure.

So how are you profiting from your experience right now? In other words, what lessons are you learning so that you can be mindful and apply them the next time something like this comes up? That's the kind of question you should be asking yourself in the present.

As for pleasures and pains not of the flesh, those refer to the pleasures and pains that come around in the practice. When you're doing meditation and you can't get the mind to settle down, that's a kind of pain. Now the Buddha doesn't say, "Okay, if you're having trouble settling down, then forget about it, don't worry about it, it's all okay, just be happy where you are." He doesn't say that. He says to use that sense of frustration to motivate yourself. You don't just stay there frustrated. You ask yourself, "Okay, what am I doing wrong?" Go back and be mindful of the checklist. Say that you're trying to be with the breath: "If the breath isn't comfortable, is the problem with the breath or with my focus? Or is it a problem with the way I perceive the breath?" The Buddha has ways of analysing these things so that you can sort out exactly what the problem might be. And then when you can see, "Oh, it's because I've got this perception of the breath that it doesn't want to come in and it's not going to come in unless I pull it," then change the perception.

As for pleasures not of the flesh, they don't just happen on their own. They're the pleasures that come from good concentration practice. Once things have settled down and they're comfortable like this, how can you maintain them? What are the skills around this? There will be parts of the mind that are happy to be here and other parts that just want to wallow and forget about doing anything more. They just want to sink into it. Well, that doesn't work.

The other extreme is the part of the mind that says, "Now that we've got concentration, let's go onto the next step." You've got to settle in first. As the Buddha says, you have to learn how to indulge in the pleasure without losing your mindfulness. How do you do that? What's the right balance? And when there's a nice, pleasant sensation of the breath, how do you maintain it? How do you let it spread? How can you get the mind to be happy to stay balanced right there? These are the questions you should be asking and trying to find an answer for through your practice.

The same holds for equanimity not of the flesh.

So it's not that things are just arising and passing away on their own and you're just learning how to sit there and be okay with whatever. You realise that they arise because of causes, and some of the causes have to do with your own intentions, have to do with what you're doing. This is how kamma applies to meditation practice. Mindfulness is there to remind you: These are the lessons you've learned from the past, either from what you've read or heard, or from what you've learned in your own practice.

So this is why we're in the present moment: because there's work to be done right here, work we've got to get done before we die.

When we think about death, it's not to get us discouraged. It's meant to give us more impetus to be really meticulous about what we're doing right here, because it's going to make a big difference. We're also here to appreciate the opportunity to do what we can while we can. Appreciating the present doesn't mean having a nice bittersweet experience, "Oh this is something pleasant, it's really nice, it's going to end someday so I'll just be here, embracing the bittersweetness of it all." That's not the Buddha's approach. If there's a pleasure, what can skillful things can you do with it? If there's a pain, what skillful things can you do with it? Because it's only in the present moment that you can apply these duties and get the results.

So when you learn how to think about death in this way, this is when it becomes auspicious. It augurs well for the present moment and for your future. Again, you might hear people say that we don't practice for the sake of the future, that we don't want to have any goals. But actually, everything you do has to have a goal. If you deny a goal, then you're putting yourself in denial, and that doesn't help. The teachings on kamma will tell you, "What you do now is going to have an impact in the present and in the future." Remember that, too, so you can be clear about what really needs to be done right now.

That's how this becomes an auspicious day.