

The Dhamma Bucket List

September 11, 2017

“How short this life.” That’s how one of the Buddha’s poems begins. And it goes on to say that even if you have a long life, it’s just a hundred years, and that’s not much. And it’s not that at the end of a hundred years you’ll have all those hundred years you can live through at your leisure and focus on the really nice times. It’s all gone. As the Thais say, time eats up beings as it eats up itself. And as that reflection goes that we chant fairly often, “Aging is normal,” as the Thais would translate it. We translate it as “We’re subject to aging.” But it’s normal. This is what comes to all of us if we don’t die first.

And it’s a matter of concern, not just for people who have been around a long time but for everybody. You realize that this body you’ve got is just going to leave you. It starts going away bit by bit by bit, and the parts that go away don’t ask permission. They don’t give you any warning when they’re going to leave. So as Ajaan Maha Boowa used to say, try to squeeze as much goodness out of the body as you can while you have the opportunity.

There was a woman who went to see him one time after she was diagnosed with cancer and not given too long to live. She wanted to meditate with him to get herself ready to die. And he told her, “Well, I can take care of your mind but I can’t take care of your body. If you’re going to come and stay here, you’re going to need to bring a doctor.” So she had an old doctor friend, a retired doctor, a woman in her eighties, who went along and sat and meditated with her, listened to the Dhamma talks together with her. Ajaan Maha Boowa gave then about eighty Dhamma talks during the three months they were there. After they returned to Bangkok, the woman with cancer died several months later. And then her friend the doctor realized that she had all these cassette tapes of these really wonderful talks.

She remembered what Ajaan Maha Boowa had said: that as you’re getting older, you want to still squeeze as much goodness as you can out of your body. The image is like squeezing juice out of a fruit. Sometimes you look in a garbage can and see fruit that’s been partially squeezed. There’s still a lot of juice there but it’s been thrown away. You realize what a waste it is.

As long as you have to throw the body away, you might as well squeeze all the juice out of it, all the goodness that you can do. So the old woman decided to transcribe the Dhamma talks. Her eyesight was failing and she wasn’t all that strong. It took her a while, but she managed to transcribe all the talks. Ended up with two huge volumes. Here she was in her eighties and she could still do that. She was proud of the fact. Rightly so.

So as you face the issue of aging, that's what you should think about. You've still got things your body can do. Try to squeeze the goodness out of them—using whatever capabilities you still have left, because you don't know when they're going to leave you. But while you have the opportunity, make the most of it.

There are two ways to prepare for this. One is to think in the long term. You can make yourself a Dhamma bucket list. They call it a bucket list because they're things you want to do before you kick the bucket. For most people, the list is composed of experiences they want to have or places they want to travel to: basically ways of spending money, getting some fleeting experience, and then being able to chalk it up, "Well I was able to do that that that before I died," But that's pretty insubstantial. You want to think instead about what are some of the good things you want to accomplish before you go? What's some good you want to leave behind in the world?

And here you can think in terms of the perfections, because the good you leave behind in the world is also good that you build into your mind: the good qualities you develop. Generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, persistence, endurance, truth, determination, goodwill, equanimity: Which of these qualities is lacking in your mind?

See if you can squeeze some of that out of your activities. And how would you go about developing those qualities? You can develop them in daily life. You can develop them by making up your mind you're going to make a special donation. Or you decide to observe the precepts more than you have in the past, or meditate more than you have in the past. As Ajaan Fuang would put it, "Leave behind a monument of your goodness." So think of that in terms of the long term.

As for the immediate term, day to day, make the most of each day as it comes. The Buddha says as the sun rises in the morning, remind yourself that this might be the last time you see the sunrise. You could die so easily during the day. Ajaan Lee makes this point, saying that death is waiting right around the corner and it can happen so easily. A slight little accident. A slight miscalculation. Some slight little thing in your body. A little germ gets into the body and then decides to settle in and leave behind lots of descendants. You never know what's going to happen. But you do know that you have today. So ask yourself, "What qualities do I have in the mind that would make it difficult for me to go? Am I ready to go?" And the answer usually is "No. I'm not ready."

Okay what's keeping you? What unfinished business do you have? Well, do that. What unskillful qualities of the mind might take over? Learn how to fight those unskillful qualities. What are the ones that you tend to give in to very easily? Learn how to fight them. Make that your top priority for the day.

I heard of a woman general in the army here in the States who made a habit everyday of making a list of the ten most important things that needed to be done that day, and then crossing through everything except one and two, and focusing on those. Now, maybe you can't make a list of what your unskillful habits are, but try and have a sense, "Okay, what needs work?" And realize, "Okay, today is my opportunity to do that work." The same early at night when the sun sets, remind yourself, "This could be my last sunset. The night is not just for sleeping. It's quiet. It's cooler. It's time to work on the mind. What would get in the way if you had to go in the night? What unfinished business needs to be done?" Well do that.

There is another passage where the Buddha says you can make it even more stringent. Each time you breathe in and breathe out, remind yourself that "This might be my last breath. What would be a good thing to do with it?" Because when the Buddha is talking about being in the present moment, he never says because it's a wonderful place to be or because you access an unconditioned awareness just by simply being in the present. He says you focus on being in the present because there's work to be done and this is the time to do it. *Ajj'eva kiccamatappbam*: Do today what needs to be done today. Because tomorrow, who knows?

But you know that you do have this breath, you do have this day. And if you have in the back of your mind that list of the good things you want to accomplish, that can give some guidance to what to do right now. That way, you can find what Ajaan Fuang called the brightness of life. He once said that's what he owed to Ajaan Lee. Ajaan Lee showed him the brightness of life.

When we talk about sunset years, that's the kind of brightness you want to have at the sunset: the brightness of a mind that's developed good qualities inside. A mind that's found something inside that is of real value. Because you look at life as it's normally lived. Everybody has families, and the families grow up and people tend to go their separate ways. You work on projects. The people who work together on the project go their separate ways. Sometimes the project gets completed but then gets wiped out.

I was riding with my father one time. I'd been visiting him and my brother, so we decided to go back Charlottesville where thirty years before we had built a house. So we drove by to see what condition the house was in, and it was in pretty sad condition. The new owners hadn't taken good care of it. On the way back, we dropped my brother off in Richmond and continued driving to Williamsburg.

And Dad commented, "You know, I have nothing to show for my life." He talked about not only the house but also the time when he was a farmer. He'd spent all year growing potatoes and then word came down from the government: Throw the potatoes away. There are too many potatoes in the

market. He ended up selling the farm and getting a job with the government, worked on the Water Resources Council, and then a very conservative President came along and abolished the Water Resources Council because it wasn't business-friendly. As he said, there was nothing to show for all that work.

So if you're looking to validate yourself in terms of what the world thinks or what you leave behind in the world, you're setting yourself up for a fall. But if you validate yourself in terms of the good qualities you build into the mind, you've got something safe. If you're generous, you're helping the world, but if for some reason the traces of your generosity get wiped out in the world, you've still got the quality of generosity in your heart and mind. If you've worked hard at being virtuous, doing a good job with your career, and if for some reason what you did and your career gets wiped out, you've still got the virtue in your heart and mind. These things don't leave you. They're part of your noble treasures and they're treasures that make life bright.

When Ajaan Fuang was talking about the brightness of life, that's what he was talking about, not the fact that you can say, "Hey, I travelled here and I travelled there. And I tasted this food and I had that experience" and all the things that other people put on their bucket lists. The brightness lies in the virtue, generosity, all the perfections you've put on your bucket list.

With what time you have left and what abilities remain in the body, squeeze those perfections out of the body—because you're squeezing out brightness. And not only is it bright for your own mind, but you also leave behind a bright example. Whoever knows of your life will see something good, something inspiring.

That way, in your sunset years as the body fades, maybe your memory fades, but still the goodness is bright. And even though you may not even get to live a hundred years, still it's a flash of brightness. And it'll be a memorial in your mind. Even if your memory goes, there is something deeper in your mind than your memory where these things are maintained.