

Taking the Long View

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Several times in the past, when I visited Ajaan Uthai in Thailand, there have been other Westerners there, and he's asked me to translate for him. He wants to give them the basic message of the Buddha's teachings.

And the point that he keeps returning to again and again is the teaching on rebirth. His feeling is that given the small amount of time he has to talk to these people, he wants to make sure that *the* important message gets through.

Because what does rebirth teach? It teaches that our actions are important, and that—in deciding what to do—we have to take the long view. And the long view's not just a month, or a year, or to the end of this life. As Ajaan Lee would say, our story is not a short story, it's a long story. It goes for many, many lifetimes. If we don't take the long view, we can cause ourselves a *lot* of trouble in the long term. This may be one of the things that Ajaan Uthai has seen in Thailand as well.

In the modern world, people tend to think in very short terms. There's that great *New Yorker* cartoon where a group of executives are sitting around a table, and the chief executive is saying, "Well, we reached our quarterly targets, but we lost our immortal souls."

Now, in Buddhism we don't talk about immortal souls but we do talk about the fact that rebirth happens. It's a process. And the Buddha didn't simply pick up this idea from his society unthinkingly. After all, it was a hot topic: Some people taught rebirth, other people taught that there was no rebirth. Even those who taught rebirth disagreed as to whether karma had any effect on it. So he was very much taking a position on what he thought was an important topic.

After all, we have to think about the things we do in order to get what we want, and the things that we can gain in the human realm often require that we do unskillful things. If, when there's no sense of right and wrong, something seems desirable and it's going to require some harmful actions to get it, then it's very easy for people to do the harmful action. They say, "Well, it doesn't matter. I get what I want." But when you take the long-term view, you realize the things that you can get that way are not worth it. You hold them for a little while and then they're gone. In the meantime, you've burdened yourself with bad karma. You've developed bad habits of the mind.

When the Buddha talks about the treasures that we can develop in the mind— things like conviction, virtue, shame, compunction, learning, generosity, and discernment—we can also develop their opposites. So the question is, which side do you want to take with you—the skillful side or the unskillful side? Because these are the things that you *can* take with you.

The things of the world cannot be taken. The position you've gained in the world, the power you've gained in the world, even the wrongs that you've righted in the world but have done in an unskillful way: Those you can't take.

In Ajaan Lee's image, when death comes it's as if we're being forced to emigrate to another country without any warning, and we just go, without our baggage. We can't take anything along with us except for what we've got in our pockets. The qualities you develop in your mind are the things in your pockets. Everything else gets left behind.

So it's especially important—when there's a lot of social unrest, where there's a lot of misery around the quarantine—that even in extreme situations like this we make sure to maintain our virtue, to maintain our good qualities. After all, these times will pass, and we may survive them or we may not. At least the body may not, but the mind will survive, the processes of the mind will survive—and they survive best when we've worked on the good qualities inside.

So as we live with one another, we should try to take it as an opportunity not to get back at one another or to take out our frustration on one another. Our relations are opportunities for developing the perfections, for developing what the Buddha called noble treasures. When you can think in those terms, you're thinking in the long term, you're taking the long view. The same thought applies to your meditation.

When the Buddha talked about rebirth, what distinguished his teaching from everybody else in his time was that he never tried to define what it was that took rebirth. That was how people at the time decided whether rebirth happened or not: They said you are *x*, and either *x* was something that was going to die with the body or else it might not die with the body. So they reasoned things out. But the Buddha never tried to define what you are. After all, it'd be something for which you were not responsible—if this were what you already were made of and you willy-nilly would or would not get reborn. Instead, he taught that rebirth is a choice that you make, and it's a process, a series of processes shaped by your choices.

The big processes are craving and clinging. If you can't get any control over your craving and clinging, then rebirth is going to be very difficult. It could lead you in all kinds of directions. Because at the moment of death—when the body is weak, the mind is frustrated, the mind is distraught—cravings and clingings can bubble up inside. We latch on and we *go*. When the mind is distraught like that, it tends not to be very choosy. It just takes whatever comes. And who knows what's going to come up bubbling up out of your karmic past.

So we meditate to get some control over our cravings and clingings. Every time the thought comes up that you could go away from the breath, you've got to realize, "Okay, this is exactly how rebirth happens. If I'm not good at sticking with what I know is right, then who knows what side paths the mind will take." So try to be really on top of yourself, watching yourself carefully.

One of the strange tendencies in modern Dhamma is to tell people, "Don't try too hard, don't place too many demands on yourself. Don't make yourself miserable over the fact that

the mind isn't centered, the mind's not settling down. Don't even try. Just let it happen naturally." But death doesn't say that. Death says, "You're going to make your choices *right now*." It's not there with a soothing voice, sympathetic for your neuroses.

So you've got to learn how to take yourself in hand and encourage yourself that, yes, you can do this. And see your little victories as just that, as victories, and not as something to deprecate. But you do want to have a string of them so that they get bigger and bigger, so that you find it easier and easier to say No to a distraction, or you can find it easier once you've realized the mind is wandering off to pull the mind right back and get back to where you were. Because these are skills you're going to really need.

It's not an act of self-compassion to say, "Well, it doesn't matter." It *does* matter. What you do with your mind *right now* is really important. And see that thought, not as a burden, but as an opportunity. So when you take the long view, you realize the things that are happening out there right now are not nearly as important as what's happening *right here* as the mind is making choices.

So, paradoxically, by taking the long view, the focus gets focused right back here, right now. But then again, that's how the Buddha gained his awakening. He took the very long view. He saw the cycles of rebirth that beings can go through. Then his immediate reaction was to turn around and look at the mind right here in the present moment, realizing that *this* is what needs to be straightened out. Once you've straightened this out, then the cycles of the long term are taken care of as well.

So again, see this as an opportunity. Appreciate the power you have to make a difference. This story of the world right now... If you believe the media, then where everything else is happening, that's where the power is. The people who seize the power, those are the important ones. But from the long view, those are the ones who are going to suffer the most.

So use the power you have right now to make wise choices—because it is within your power to really make a difference, a difference that will last for the long term.