

A Memorial to Your Life

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There's a phrase that Ajaan Fuang would use when he tried to teach people to put forth extra effort in the practice—whether in the practice of generosity, virtue, or meditation. And that was to “create a memorial to your life.” It took me a while to understand what he was talking about. Basically, suppose that in some future lifetime you gain the power of remembering your previous lifetimes. What will you remember about this lifetime? He's basically saying that you'd like to be able to remember something really good that you've done: “That was the lifetime when I meditated more. That was the lifetime when I was more generous, more virtuous.”

So think about what kind of memorial you'd like to have for this lifetime. Otherwise, there's just the monotony that the Buddha described with regard to his own memories of previous lifetimes: He was born as this kind of being and had this appearance, this experience of pleasure, this experience of pain. This was the kind of food he ate. Then he died. Then he was born again. The same things, over and over and over again: your appearance, pleasure, pain, food, die. If that's the memorial to your life, then it's nothing special to commemorate. So think about what you'd like to be able to remember, and then do that.

It's like the people who like to have interesting stories to tell, so they go out and do interesting things. In this case, you want to have something really good to tell yourself. Of course, one of Ajaan Fuang's memorials was the chedi we built at the top of the mountain there in his monastery. When we did the blasting to clear that part of the mountain, there was a rock that came up as an almost perfect rectangle. So Ajaan Fuang decided that we'd have a Buddha footprint carved on the top of the rectangle. On the sides of the rectangle, he had the word *iddhipāda* placed—*iddhipāda* was the “base of success” or “base of power”—as a reminder of how you build a memorial to your life.

The first base of success is desire: You *want* to do something special. Think about what the Buddha did that was special. He found the path to the end of suffering and was able to teach it to many beings. That's probably the most special thing you can do. You might not be able to find the path—after all, the Buddha has found it for us—but you can find that path inside you, taking his instructions on where to look and how to look. Think about what a good thing that would be: the *end* of suffering.

Think about what's required to do that. Focus on the path: It's basically virtue, concentration, and discernment. We hear so much about how craving is a bad thing in the Buddha's eyes, but there is the desire that's part of right effort, and here it's one of the bases of success. The trick, of course, is to desire the right things and to focus your desire properly on the causes, not so much on the results. Assuming that you know the connection between the causes and the results, you then focus on *doing* the causes. You don't just sit around, waiting for the results to come.

This is related to the Buddha's observation on how wisdom begins. You ask those who know: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" The wisdom there lies in wanting to focus on the causes. You realize that happiness doesn't come floating by. There are causes: They're in your actions. So you want to know what to do, so that your desire then gets focused on what you have to do.

Try to do this well. You're sitting here, watching the breath. What does it mean to watch the breath well? You stay continually with it, as best you can. If you wander off, you come back as quickly as possible, firmly, but without any recrimination. When you come back, reward yourself. Breathe in a way that feels especially good. Think of a part of the body that may not be getting much breath energy right now. Well, give it some.

In other words, doing this well involves the other bases for success. The first is persistence: You stick with it. You have a clear sense of what's skillful, what's not skillful, and then you motivate yourself to do what's skillful. Then you reflect. The reflection is basically the intentness and the circumspection with which you do this. Those are the other two bases for success.

You really give this your full attention: That's intentness. Other things will come along and try to knock you off: sometimes ordinary things like outside distractions or your own discursive thinking—in other words, thinking that's not involved in the breath right now. Sometimes strange things can happen: Your sense of the body gets strange. Sometimes it swells up. If you opened your eyes, you'd see your body was its normal size. But when you close your eyes, your internal sense of the body gets very large—or very small. Or you begin to notice that you're missing certain parts in your inner sense of the body. Or there are some waves of energy. Make note of those things, but don't focus on them.

In other words, you note them, and you immediately get back to the breath, because you want to be able to hold on to this breath. Give it your full attention, despite the distractions that come. It's like being in a large, noisy city, but being

able to focus on whatever work you have to do. As you stay focused, the range of your focus begins to enlarge. The disturbances begin to calm down.

You notice in Ajaan Lee's book, *The Craft of the Heart*, his discussion of rapture is under "disturbance." The Buddha lists rapture, of course, as a factor for the first two jhanas. But feelings of rapture are things you have to get beyond if you want the mind to be really still. So even though they're one of the rewards of getting the mind to settle down, you can't focus on them. You have to give your full attention to your breath. That's what the intentness is all about: You want to do this really well. Don't let your range of attention get divided up. Give it all to the breath and the mind together.

Then reflect on what you're doing: That's what circumspection is all about. You commit yourself to getting the mind with the breath, and then you watch it. This ability to watch your own mind is really central to the practice, because after all, how are you going to watch your cravings unless you can watch your own mind? How are you going to watch your clinging? These are the things you're doing. Suffering is not something that gets imposed on you. It's something you do. And the causes of suffering are things that you do.

So it's imperative that you have to learn how to observe yourself in action. Observe yourself as you're being generous. Observe yourself as you try to hold by the precepts. Observe yourself as the mind is settling down. The Buddha talks about this again and again and again in the Canon. You get the mind in a good state of concentration, get it really snug with its object, get it past the rapture, get it past the pleasure, even. There's a sense of clear, bright awareness.

Then observe that clear, bright awareness. It seems so pure, so still, when you first hit it. It's only when you stay with it for a long period of time, step back a little bit, that you begin to see: There's still stress in here. What are you doing that's causing the stress? Look for it.

And depending on what you find, either you go to a deeper level of concentration—for example, if you see that to have any perception of the body as having a shape is imposing a little bit too much on it, okay, drop that perception. Let the body just be a cloud, little droplets of mist, not clearly defined. Then notice the space between those little droplets. It extends out in all directions. It seems larger than the range of your awareness. Okay, that's going to be more still than just being with the still breath—this sense of the body being filled with your awareness right here—but it's just another state of concentration.

You also might notice how you're talking to yourself about the stillness, and how many layers of conversation there are about the stillness as you peel those

layers away. It is possible that you can peel away all the levels of fabrication there might be in the mind. Then you go to a place that's very different.

So there's a lot to explore here, but the important thing is that you learn how to observe your mind in action. Only then can you comprehend suffering, let go of the cause, fully develop the path, so that you can realize the cessation of suffering. All this comes under that quality of asking questions, and then looking, paying full attention, asking questions again. This interplay back and forth between intentness and circumspection, commitment and reflection—this is what will take you far. It's how the Buddha found the answer to his question about suffering, how he found the answer to questions about aging, illness, and death, where these things come from.

All too many meditators get stuck on things because they're not really good at observing their own minds. They read a passage in the Canon, and they look at their minds and say, "Oh, this must be that, and that must be this. I'll let go, let go, let go," and then decide they've let go of everything. But they're not watching themselves carefully. They don't bother to turn around and look at, "Well, who's talking about all this? Who's doing this?"

Remember how the Buddha used the mirror as an image for the path in his early lessons for Rahula. He said to use your actions as a mirror to look into your mind. So you want to look back at what you're doing. When he talked about the Dhamma as a mirror, again, it's looking back at your mind.

So try to develop this ability to be still, but also observe what's going on in your mind. You'll see a lot of things you wouldn't have seen otherwise. This is how you develop success and power in the meditation—the kind of meditation that really is worth remembering, a memorial to your life, the fact that at least this time around, you met with the Buddha's teachings and you did your best to take advantage of them. This opportunity doesn't always come along, but here it is. So take advantage of it now.