

Death Is Normal

August 13, 2016

Years back, my father came to visit in Thailand, and so I arranged to have Ajaan Fuang teach him how to meditate. His first question for Ajaan Fuang was that he was a Christian; was that going to be any obstacle in his meditation? Ajaan Fuang said, “No, we’re going to be focusing on the breath. The breath doesn’t belong to Christianity; it doesn’t belong to Buddhism. It belongs to everybody. It’s common property all over the world.”

When you focus on the breath, then you’ve got your mind. And we can just talk about the mind directly without any thought about what religion we are, because the problem with the mind everywhere in the world is all the same. There’s the suffering of aging, illness, death, and separation. These are things we all face. And even though we don’t want these things to happen, they’re a normal part of the world.

There’s a chant: Aging is normal; illness is normal; death is normal. We’re going to be separated from all that we love. This applies to everybody. It doesn’t make the hurt go away, but it does make it not quite so sharp. If this were something that happened just to us or just now, it would be devastating. But you reflect: This is the way it is all over the world. And we need skills in order not to have to suffer from these things. We have to be prepared.

This is why we meditate—so that we can have some skills in the mind, so that when something comes up in the mind, you don’t have to go immediately to what the first thought is. You can step back and focus on the breath. It keeps you anchored in the present moment. And at the same time, it gives you a comfortable place to stay because you can adjust the breath. If you try long breathing for a while and find that it’s good, you stick with long breathing. If it doesn’t feel so good, you can make it shorter. You can try deep breathing, shallow breathing, heavy, light—all kinds of ways of adjusting your breath.

As you’re adjusting the breath, you’re in the present moment. Your mind is focused here. Anything else that comes up at the moment, you can just let it pass, let it pass. You’re training yourself in mindfulness—the ability to keep something in mind; alertness—the ability to know what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing; and a quality called ardency, which means putting some effort into this to do it well. Because after all, your mind’s happiness depends on its training. If the mind is untrained, it can cause a lot of harm to itself and to people around you. So you try to do this well.

You’re developing good qualities in the mind regardless of what your background is. These are things we all need in all activities in life. At the same time, you’re giving the mind the ability to step out of unskillful thoughts: thoughts that cause sadness and other qualities of mind that are going to get in the way of your seeing things clearly and making the right decisions.

We all need to be able to step out of our thoughts. Otherwise it's as if a thought comes up and we jump into it. It's like we're standing on the side of the road and a car drives up. The driver says, "Hey, hop in!" You hop right in without asking any questions at all. "Who are you? Where are you going?" If we lived like that, we'd die. But that's how our mind usually operates with its thoughts. This is one of the reasons why our goodness sometimes dies. We jump into a thought, and it takes us down a bad spiral. It takes us off into greed, into aversion, into delusion—all kinds of places where we really don't want to go.

So we need the ability to step out. You jump out when you realize it's not a good car to be in and the driver's not trustworthy. This is how you jump out safely: You just jump back to the breath. And meanwhile, you're developing good qualities of the mind. This gives you a refuge inside, a safe place to stay so that you're more in control of your thoughts. Otherwise, your thoughts and emotions take over; you become their slave. But training the mind changes the balance of power inside. Now *you're* in charge. You decide which thoughts you want to go with and which ones you don't. When you find you made the wrong choice to begin with, you can jump right out. The breath is a safe place to land. And as we do this, we're putting the mind in much better shape.

We're making merit for Dang tonight, Dang Pansi, who's done a lot for the monastery. She was right there at the very beginning. Even before the beginning of the monastery, she was here. She saw that this was a good place to have a monastery, and she was one of the people who arranged for it to happen. After I'd promised that I would come and help—I went back to Thailand, had malaria and so I couldn't come right back—Ajaan Suwat was concerned that I might forget, so she went to Thailand and tracked me down. She didn't even know where Wat Dhammasathit was, but she went all the way to find me.

So she's been with the monastery from the very beginning. We're thinking about her tonight. As we think about her, we have to realize that the currents of the mind make contact. Even though we can't talk to her physically right now, there is a quality of the mind that flows out to other people. That's how we make contact, and so you have to ask yourself: What kind of current do you want to be sending in her direction right now? You want to send a good current. This is one of the reasons why we meditate, to put the mind in good shape so that it's sending out good currents. It's why we also have the practice of generosity and taking the precepts when someone has died.

Of course, these are practices we do all the time, but it's especially important to do them at a time like this so that you put the mind in good shape. There's the pleasure and the happiness, the well-being that come from generosity, the well-being that comes from virtue, and the steadiness of mind that comes from developing the mind in concentration and goodwill. We try to develop these qualities so that when we think of Dang, the current that goes her direction is a good current. It's a nourishing current to help her get set up wherever she's going.

At the same time, it's time for us to reflect that some day, that may be our picture up there next to the Buddha. The monks may be chanting *Anicca vata sankhara* for us.

So what are you going to do with the amount of life that you have left? This is a good question we should all ask because we don't know how much time we have, but we do know we have this breath right now. You want to make the most of it. Whatever you can do in terms of being generous, being virtuous, getting your mind under control: It's all to the good. So you've got this breath right now to take that opportunity. You're developing the quality of heedfulness, which is the basis for all good qualities.

It was Plato who once said that wisdom begins with the thought of death. Realizing that our time here is limited, we have to do something special to make the most of it. We can't just fritter our eternity away because we don't have an eternity to fritter away. We have to face the fact that we've got to get the mind prepared for the dangers that lie in wait. And this is the way to do it: Train the mind so that it's more in control of its thoughts, so that when aging comes, when illness comes, when death comes, the thoughts that would go running all over the place, frantically, don't pull you with them. You have a good solid place to stay.

In Thailand, they talk about how merit-making associated with a funeral like this is *avamangala*, which means inauspicious merit-making. But that's more of a Brahmanical idea. It's not really a Buddhist idea. Because when you come to a ceremony like this, it forces you to be heedful, to think about the death that Dang has already faced and that we're all going to be facing at some point or another. And we've got to be prepared, with whatever time we've got.

So this kind of ceremony actually makes us more heedful, which means that it's *mangala*: It's something auspicious for us. It may not be pleasant, but it's good for the mind to have lessons in heedfulness to remind ourselves that our time is limited. Our time together is limited, so we do what we can for one another. Our time in this human plane is limited, so make the most of the fact that you've got a human mind. You've got human capabilities, and among those capabilities is the ability to train your mind so that regardless of what happens, you don't have to suffer.

The people with untrained minds are the ones who flail around and cause themselves suffering. They cause other people suffering, too, because when you see someone really suffering like that, you want to do your best to help them. But many times, they're beyond help. They can't hear anymore; they can't understand anything anymore. It places a huge burden on the people around them. That's the nature of an untrained mind. But if the mind is trained, you're perfectly in control. Even when the body's falling apart, the mind can maintain its sense of being separate from the body, so that it's not pulled in by the issues of the body. In this way, you don't suffer, and you don't cause suffering for the people around you.

So remember, each time you breathe in, you have the opportunity to do good. Dang has already taught us this lesson: We're all going to have to go. Sometimes we get to say goodbye;

sometimes we don't get to say goodbye. Sometimes we know the end is coming; sometimes, whoops, it just happens. It's shocking, but it's normal. This is the way of human life. So we should develop the skills so that what's normal here doesn't knock us off balance.

We can maintain our own normalcy of mind, a mind with its own sense of well-being and sufficiency inside. That's a skill that's good for us and good for all the people with whom our mental currents make contact.