

The Lightning Bolt

June 3, 2009

The lightning bolt that struck here today was so close you could feel it in your skin; you could hear it sizzling and crackling in the air. We could have died. That would have been very sudden. A sense of disorientation: “Why is there this weird sense in the air? What’s happening?” And it could have struck us. That would have been it.

It makes you stop and reflect, as the passage says, that we’re subject to death. In the Thai translation, it actually says: “Death is normal.” It happens all the time. So the Buddha has you reflect every day: Are you ready to go? He says, when the Sun rises, that might be your last sunrise. Are you ready to go? As the Sun sets, this might be your last sunset. Something might happen tonight. Are you ready to go? The answer almost always is, “No, not yet.”

So when the answer is, “not yet,” what do you have left to do? This contemplation is not to get you discouraged. It’s to get you to stay heedful, that there is important work in training the mind, and you don’t want to put it off to tomorrow or next week or even just the next breath. You’ve got this breath right now. What can you do to train the mind with this breath? What work needs to be done? Make that your top priority.

You’ve probably noticed around here that we have a lot of bowing, along with chants to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha every day. That reflection just now on respect for the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha: What it comes down to is respect for your mind, respect for your desire for true happiness. After all, that’s how Buddha ordered his life. He had looked at what was important in his life and he said, “I’ve got to get my mind trained. If there’s a possibility for true happiness, I want to give my life to that possibility.” Then he tried various ways, ran into some dead ends, but ultimately he did find that it is possible through human effort to find true happiness.

He’d been discouraged by other people. They kept saying that true happiness is impossible, just as our society keeps saying that today. “Buy our new sponge mop and you’ll be happy. Don’t worry about true happiness. Just be interested in the kind of happiness that comes from buying our things, or buying the experiences we can offer you right now.”

There’s this whole economy around, “the Ford experience,” “the Yosemite experience”—experiences that slip through our minds like water through our fingers. The economy of our society is geared to distract us from our desire for true

happiness and to teach us disrespect for our desire for true happiness, telling us it's impossible or that it's selfish. But when we respect the Buddha, we're respecting our desire that "True happiness is possible and honorable, and I want to do what I can find it."

So we listen to those who've seemed to find true happiness before us, and we give the teaching a try. Buddhism is famous for allowing people to question things and to put things to the test. But putting things to the test requires an awful lot of commitment. So we start with this attitude of respect. But here again, the respect is directed not just outside, but also inside as well. As Ajaan Suwat liked to say, as you sit down here, sit down with an attitude of respect for what you're doing. You're doing important work here, delicate work: training the mind. Whether it's going well or going poorly, that's not the issue right now. The issue is that you keep at it, that you don't let yourself get discouraged, and that you try to create the right conditions, both inside and out, for focusing on training the mind as your top priority.

In the texts they talk about four factors for gaining your first taste of the deathless. One is trying to find a person of integrity, to learn what you can from that person so that you don't have to keep reinventing the Dhamma wheel every time you sit down.

Once you're found a person of integrity, you listen to that person's Dhamma.

It's not that you believe everything you hear, because the third factor is appropriate attention, as you subject that Dhamma to the right questions: Does this Dhamma sound like it's going to lead to the end of suffering or is it going to get you entangled, either in views or social responsibilities that will distract you from really focusing on the mind? You also take that Dhamma and you reflect on yourself: "What does this Dhamma tell me about my own suffering? What does it tell me about the causes of my suffering?"

This is an important part of the practice: using the Dhamma to question yourself. All too often, we want to change the Dhamma to suit our preferences, measuring the Dhamma against our own ideas. But you have to be willing to measure your own ideas against the Dhamma, measure your own practices against the Dhamma, so that you can see which things arising in the mind are your friends, and which things are your enemies, which things actually help in the practice to put an end to suffering, and which parts of your mind, no matter how much you cherish them, are actually obstacles.

The fourth factor is that once you see what needs to be done, you do it. This is called practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. Specifically, you do what has to be done to give rise to a sense of disenchantment, dispassion, for the things

you've been feeding on that actually lead to suffering. You do this to see if what the Buddha said is true, that there really is a deathless element or a deathless dimension that can be touched in the mind—although, instead of touching it with the mind, he said, “seeing it with the body,” “touching it with the body”: In other words, you sense it with your whole range of experience.

So that's what we are after: that possibility.

These four factors: finding someone who's a person of integrity—which the Buddha defines in one of the texts as someone who doesn't have the sort of greed, aversion, or delusion that would cause him or her to claim knowledge that he or she didn't have: You find a person of integrity, you listen to the person's Dhamma, you apply appropriate attention to it. In other words, you try to look at it in terms of four noble truths and the duties of the four noble truths. Then you look at your own life and say, “Okay, what in my life needs to be changed? Which potentials in the mind should I develop and which potentials in the mind should I let go so that I can develop dispassion for what's weighing me down?”

There's that famous saying by the third Chan patriarch, that the great way is not difficult for those with no preferences. There are lots of different ways of understanding that statement, but the most useful one is that you do what has to be done. If the path requires that you work on concentration, you work on concentration. If it requires that you give up certain things that you like, you say, “Well, I'll try it. I'll try giving them up and see what happens.” You don't let your preferences get in the way.

At the same time, learn how to talk yourself into *wanting* to do the practice. This is an important element in right effort that tends to get overlooked: the role of desire. For years when people were translating the Pali Canon and they came across the word desire, *chanda*, in the definition of right effort, and they said, “This can't be. After all desire is bad. It's got to be something else.” So they translated it as “zeal or “enthusiasm.” But the word actually means desire. You try to generate the desire to do what's skillful and to abandon what's not. It doesn't mean you have to wear yourself out.

This is why there are lots of topics for meditation. We take the breath as our home base, as the object we keep returning to, because as the Buddha said, it's the best one for clearing unskillful states out of the mind, like rain clearing the dust out of the air.

But there are times when simply sitting here with the breath is not going to be enough. So you can stop and reflect on the Buddha. What kind of the person was the Buddha? He had all that wealth, all that power, and then he left it, went out into the forest, put himself on the line. When he came back, he offered his

teachings for free. No suggested donations. No dana talks. Anyone came who needed to know the Dhamma, he would teach the Dhamma. He was that kind of person. So we're following a path taught by a person like that.

Reflect on the Dhamma. The practice of the Dhamma, as they say, is good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end. It asks you to do things that are honorable, clearheaded, harmless, helpful both to yourself and the people around you. This path to happiness is very different from most of the paths to happiness that the world has to offer, the ones that say, "You have to be willing to cut corners here and to take advantage of other people there, and forget about your values, to do what you can to get ahead." That's not the kind of path we have here. It's totally upright path, a straightforward and honorable path. There's a dignity in following this path that you don't find in most of the ways people scrap around to find happiness.

You can reflect on the Sangha. When you think you're having difficulties in the practice, go back and read the Therigatha and Theragatha, stories of the elder nuns and elder monks, all the difficulties they went through in order to attain awakening. But they were able to do it. Many times they were worse off than you are now, yet they were able to pull themselves together. If they can do it, you can, too.

You can reflect on your virtue: the times in the past when you've done good things that you didn't have to do. Reflect on your generosity: the times when you were generous when you didn't have to be generous, either with material things, your time, your knowledge, or your forgiveness. These reflections help inspire a sense of confidence in yourself. Acts of generosity, acts of virtue are the basis for the path, so you've already got some of the basis already there under our belt.

You can reflect on death. Again, that lightning bolt: You could feel it in your body. It was taken over. Even before you knew what was happening, the body was already reacting to it. Death can come in that way. And you want to be ready to go in a way where there are no regrets, nothing you hang on to.

So these are all ways of generating desire to focus on the practice so that you can take delight in seeing an unskillful quality slough away, and seeing skillful qualities growing. No matter how slowly they may seem to grow, they are there. You've got something in the mind that's worth treasuring, worth protecting, worth nurturing.

So these four qualities—finding a person of integrity, listen to that person's Dharma, applying the questions of appropriate attention, and then practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma: These are the factors for stream entry. These are the factors that will take you to the deathless. They call it reaching a footing, or

gaining a footing. The image of is of crossing a river. In the beginning, it's difficult because all kinds of currents are coming down the river, and who knows what's in the river that they're sweeping along. I was close friends with a family in Thailand. Originally they had lived on a houseboat in a river outside of Ayutthaya, the Pasak. The younger son of the family was a student of mine in the university where I was teaching there. He had been about a year old, sitting on the edge of the houseboat, when he'd fallen into the river. His father jumped into the river to save him. The river was in full flood at the time. And apparently there was a huge tree just under the surface of the river coming down the river, full speed, and it knocked the father in the ribs. He died the day after that.

So when they have the image in the Canon of crossing a river, it's not a nice placid river. They're talking about a big dangerous river. There are bound to be all kinds of things knocking into you. As you practice, don't let yourself get discouraged by them. If unskillful thoughts come up, you've got to find ways to sidestep them. If you can't deal with them directly right now, allow them to go off to the side. Don't put yourself right in the line of fire. Whatever the techniques required, you try to master them. Eventually you'll get to the point where you're getting to the other side and you reach down and can feel the bottom of the river. You're close to the shore. They call that coming ashore in deathless or gaining a footing in the deathless. That's the point where you know you're not going to be swept away by the flood.

And it's these very basic things that get you there, combined with that attitude of respect.

This is an important task. You want to have respect for your desire for true happiness, because it is possible. It is a worthwhile goal. Don't let anybody else, either inside or outside, tell you any different. And even if you don't go all the way in this lifetime, there's another chance, so the effort that's put into practice isn't wasted. Just try to keep that set of values foremost in your mind. After all, the Buddha had a lot of compassion for your desire for true happiness. He took it seriously, and so should you.