

## *Integrity — In Memory of Luang Loong*

*March 24, 2010*

Tonight we gather in honor of Luang Loong, the monk we call Venerable Uncle, who passed away last night. He was a student of Ajaan Fuang. He had known Ajaan Lee ever since he was a young novice. He had arranged for Ajaan Fuang to teach in Bangkok, looked after Ajaan Fuang while he was there, and looked after me as I came and ordained in Thailand. He was the monk who shaved my head the day I ordained, and looked after me especially after Ajaan Fuang passed away.

So. Another good person has gone, and we gather together to make merit in his honor.

This term “making merit” may sound strange in English. It sounds better in Thai. Basically what it means is that we do good in a way that leads to true happiness. Then we compound the interest by dedicating the merit to other people so that they may find true happiness, too. It’s a way of showing gratitude, in honor of the goodness of the people who have passed on. Officially in the textbooks that teach Dhamma in Thailand, they talk about a funeral as an inauspicious occasion. But actually the Buddha never taught that. Any occasion that gives rise to heedfulness, he said, is an auspicious occasion. When you see a dead person, he said, you reflect on the fact that that’s the fate of your body as well.

Then the next question is, what do you take with you when you die, and what you leave behind? Hopefully, you take some goodness with you and leave some goodness behind. In fact, the more goodness you leave behind, the more goodness you take with you.

In Luang Loong’s case, one of his outstanding virtues was his integrity. Years back, when he was a young monk—and he has always had this character of being very plainspoken—there were a couple of senior monks who took offense at that. One of them happened to be the meal assigner at Wat Makut, who decided to cut Luang Loong off from the meals that the monks were invited to. And Luang Loong didn’t complain. This went on for months and months. Lay people would come to the monastery and actually specify that they wanted Luang Loong to come to their invitational meals, but he wouldn’t go, because the meal assigner didn’t assign him. Finally, word got to the abbot. The abbot checked the books and discovered that, sure enough, the meal assigner had been unfair. So they had a

meeting of the Sangha, they removed the meal assigner from the office, and they put Luang Loong in charge instead.

Luang Loong was so honest in the way he dealt with that assignment that he kept it for the rest of his life. Sometimes there'd be controversies caused by people who wanted a little bit more than what they got. But Luang Loong was so honest and straightforward about how he assigned meals and kept records that he was never removed from office. And when that old meal assigner was suffering from his final illness, it turned out that Luang Loong was the only monk in the monastery who came to look after him. This is one of the characteristics of Luang Loong that we admire: that he was so reliable.

So when you think of someone who has just passed away, it's not simply a matter looking at their body and saying, "That's the fate of this body." You look at the goodness that they left behind and you ask yourself, "Do I have some goodness to leave behind? And what kind of goodness am I leaving behind?"

This is where the funeral becomes auspicious, when you make up your mind that you've got to make more effort in whatever area you choose: more effort in your generosity, more effort in your virtue, more effort in your meditation. After all, it's the effort you put into the goodness of the heart: That's what both stays here and is something you can take with you.

In the West, we often think about rebirth as a very "self" kind of teaching—the idea that my self is going to endure beyond death. It seems to contradict to the teaching on not-self. But actually it's a very strong teaching on not-self. When Ven. Ratthapala was talking to the king about why he had ordained, he illustrated the principle of inconstancy with aging, stress with illness, and not-self with the fact that when you pass on, you have to leave everything behind. Everything that's yours becomes not-yours. So it's not all that consoling a thought, because all the things that you shore up here on this earth in this lifetime to provide for yourself in the future: Once you leave the body, you don't have any guarantee that that stuff is going to go with you. In fact, you're going to have to leave it behind. It's like suddenly being evacuated with no time to pack at all. All you take with you is your skill set. So you have to ask yourself, "What skills am I developing in terms of perfections?"

In Luang Loong's case, it was generosity. He was an extremely generous person. A couple of years back, there was a scandal around the meal assigner in another monastery in Bangkok. He had gotten this position in one of the monasteries that had a crematorium, and there were a lot of concessions that went along with the funeral business: the people who provided the ice, the people who provided the food, the people who provided the flowers, etc., for the funerals

there. This particular meal assigner had driven out all the other people who had had the concessions and put his relatives in their place—and amassed quite a lot of money.

When the scandal broke, one of the newspapers in Bangkok decided to go around to all the major funeral monasteries and check out the bank accounts of the different meal assigners. And they found that Luang Loong, among all of them, was the poorest. Whatever would come his way, he shared. People would give him amulets, and he'd give them away. Someone once commented on how many amulets he'd got, valuable ones, and told him, "Gee, you must have made a lot of merit in the previous lifetime." Luang Loong said, no, it was this lifetime. Whatever he got, he would give away, give away. So his generosity and integrity developed a lot of the perfections. That's why we respect him. This is why people feel a lot of affection for him.

So you look at his life and turn around and look at your life and see in what ways you can develop more perfections. Maybe the word *perfection* is not a good one. The word *parami* can be translated in one way as coming from *param*, the things that take you to the other side, and in another way as coming from *parama*, things should be foremost in your life. The skills you develop, and here skillful means skills of the heart and mind, good qualities of the heart and mind: Those are the things you take with you—paradoxically, by leaving a lot of them behind, giving them to the world.

So try to make this an auspicious occasion. Look at your life and see in what areas you can improve it, what further perfections, what further paramis you should give priority to—and what things you have to learn how to let go in order to maintain those priorities.

So take this time to reflect. As you meditate, try to make your mind one, because we're going to be giving this meditation to Luang Loong, and the more single your mind is, the more value it has. When you're going to give something as a gift, you want to make sure it's a good gift. And the oneness of the mind is like going to a market and finding there's only one fruit of a particular kind there. Imagine, if there were just one mango in the whole market, how valuable that mango would be. If there are lots of mangos, sometimes they end up throwing them away, because there are too many to sell. So don't make your mind many right now. Make it one, so that it's a gift you'd be proud to give.