

Alone at Death, but Not Lonely

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It's amazing how rarely the Buddha talks about being in the present moment, given that so much of the meditation is focused here. When he talks about how important it is to be here, it's always with the reflection that there's work to be done here and you don't know how much time you have.

So we focus on the breath, we focus on our mind in the present moment, because this is the starting point of so much of our suffering. We want to understand why: what's causing us to act in ways in the present moment that are causing suffering now and on into the future. After all, it's our intentions that shape our life. Where do intentions happen? They happen right here, right now. All too often, they're relegated down to the middle-level bureaucracy in the mind. It's as if you were the chairman of your company and you think you're in charge, but it turns out that a lot of your underlings are making decisions without your knowing it. So you want to dig down into the present moment to see: What's going on here? What are the decisions that are being made?

As the Buddha said, we shape our experience out of the raw material that comes from our past karma. But it's the skill with which we shape it that makes all the difference. It's because we have a lack of skill—that's one of the meanings of *avijjā*, or ignorance—that the things we do for the sake of happiness end up causing pain. It's bad enough when you're here relatively healthy, but things get worse as you get older. When aging comes, it comes right here. When death comes, it comes right here. And what will you have to deal with these things when they come?

Several years back, I was at a funeral in Bangkok. It was for a monk I'd known and respected and had a lot of affection for. We called him Luang Lung, which means Venerable Uncle. His funeral was an amazingly happy affair, partly because a lot of us hadn't seen one another for many years. People came to the funeral, especially Ajaan Fuang's students, and in some cases it'd been twenty years since we'd seen one another, so there was a lot of socializing going on. On top of that, him Luang Lung had touched the lives of a lot of people. On the day of his cremation, thousands of people showed up.

But then the next day, there was what was called the gathering of the ashes, in which whatever bones were remaining from his cremation were gathered together. Some of them were placed in a little niche in the chedi there at Wat Makut, and the rest were taken out and placed in the ocean. The Thai Navy has its academy

right there at the mouth of the Chao Phraya river, and one of the services they perform is a boat for people who want to take ashes out and scatter them in the ocean. Although you don't really scatter them: You have to put them in a container that's is sealed, because the fishermen at the mouth of the river don't like the idea that either they're going to catch bones in their nets or that the fish they're catching have been feeding on people's bones. So the container has to be sealed as it goes into the water.

It happened to be very overcast day. We had to skirt around Bangkok because that was the middle of the demonstrations in 2010. We got out there in the ocean right at the mouth of the river. The sky was grey and the ocean was grey. The sky was flat and featureless. The ocean was still and featureless. In fact, everything was so grey that it was hard to tell where the horizon was. The sky and the ocean seemed to blend into each other.

So we did the ceremony, placed the container down in the water, scattered some flowers. The boat did a final turn, like a salute, before heading back to shore. As we looked back, there it was, all we could see was just a big grey expanse with a few little flowers floating in the water. You knew they were going to sink pretty soon, and then there would no sign of Luang Lung at all. There weren't that many of us, the thousands that had been there the day before had all gone, there were about ten or fifteen of us. A lot of the women began to cry. It seemed so lonely.

Of course, when you cry over a loss like that, a lot of it is that you're crying for yourself because you realize each of us someday is going to be there, that lonely spot: grey, featureless. And what do we have as our friend there? The problem is when you're lonely, you tend to grab on to your cravings, take them as your friends. But again, our cravings come from ignorance, and if we follow them, they lead to a lot of suffering. So you need skills in order to recognize that these are cravings and not necessarily friends. You can't depend on them. You've got to have something else beside your cravings as your companions at a time like that.

That's where the skills of meditation come in. You need mindfulness, you need alertness, you need ardency, you need concentration, you need discernment—particularly mindfulness and discernment. They put these two concepts together a lot in Thailand. There's a Thai compound word: *satipañña*. When you take the compound apart, it means mindfulness-discernment; when you put it together, it means intelligence. It's the opposite of ignorance—or at least these are the qualities that can do away with ignorance. That's what we're trying to develop as we meditate.

So how do we develop this mindfulness and discernment? As Ajaan Lee points out, discernment is a matter of skill and it comes from learning how to do

something skillfully. It's not something you pick up just from reading books and getting the concepts. The wisdom comes in seeing that these concepts are useful as tools for getting rid of our ignorance, for getting to know the mind really, really well so that it doesn't fall for its old cravings.

The analogy he gives is of learning any physical skill, like making clay tiles or baskets. You get instructions, you put them into practice, but then it's pretty common that the first time you put things together, the end product doesn't look like the teacher's. So either you get discouraged and give up, or else you can say, "Well, the teacher's a human being; I'm a human being. If the teacher can do it, so can I." You look at what you've done and then you compare it to the standard set by the teacher and you see what went wrong. Then you go back and you look very carefully at how you might change what you did.

Then you look very carefully at yourself while you're, say, making the new tiles. You get more and more clear about what you're doing and what the results are. You can see the connection, say, where there was a momentary lapse in mindfulness, or something that wasn't quite regular, as when you're weaving something or when you're running a sewing machine: Putting the cloth in, how do you put it in evenly? How do you make sure that you don't rush things, bunch things up? How you make sure that the seam you're making is straight? You realize you have to be very careful about looking at what you're doing and looking at the results, at the same time learning how to make adjustments.

This requires two other qualities that Ajaan Lee connected with discernment. One is in the context of concentration practice and the other's in the context of mindfulness. And, of course, he doesn't draw a clear line between the two practices: Mindfulness and concentration go together. In terms of concentration, the discernment factor is evaluation. In terms of mindfulness, it's ardency. Ardency means putting of your whole heart into what you're doing, because you want to do it really well.

One of the reasons we think about death as a motivation for meditation is that you realize you're going to need some really strong skills then. It's at that point where the body is going to be the least help, because it's going to be leaving you and it's probably going to not leave you smoothly and quietly. It's not going to slip out with little cat's feet like the fog. There's going to be a lot of turmoil, there's going to be pain, and different parts of the body that used to function well are just going to start falling apart.

We get little foretastes of this as we age: Things don't go well for a while, then they go back to regularity; and then they slip off and do something else again, and then they come back. Over time, though, the slipping off comes more and more

often, and the coming back gets less and less strong. Then finally the whole thing just falls apart. Someone once compared it to a house on fire. When the house is on fire, none of the rooms in the house are safe. Yet in the midst of that, you've got to be cool and calm.

So one of the things we do as we stay here in the present moment is learn how to be cool and calm when dealing with pain. You want to be ardent in figuring out: Why is it that pain in the body has an impact on the mind? If you learn how to see that as something strange, then you've got a handle on the problem. All too often our reaction is, "Well, of course, if there's a pain in the body, it's going to pain the mind because the body and the mind are connected and this is *our* body." But if you can see that pain in the body does not have to create problems for the mind, and the fact that it does is something strange, then you can try to figure out what happens. That attitude of seeing it as strange—stepping back from it and seeing it as something separate and a little bit alien: That's going to help you a lot.

In addition to ardency, in the context of concentration the discernment factor is evaluation. You look at what you're doing and you figure out: "Is it going well? If it's not going well, what can I do to make it better?" As you can see, the ardency and the evaluation connect very directly to that image of learning a skill. You want to do it well, and then you have to evaluate what you're doing, to see if it really is as good as you'd like it to be. When you've mastered what you've learned from the teacher, you say, "Okay, is there anything more I can do with this?" This is how skills get developed. In what direction do you want to develop your skill as a maker of tiles, a basket weaver, or a tailor? You do that through ardency and evaluation. These can become your friends.

The ardency is the quality of the will that goes into this, and the evaluation is the quality of the observer. William James once talked about two kinds of truth: truths of the will and truths of the observer. A truth of the observer is one where you can't let your will get in the way. If you're studying stars, for instance, you can't cook the data because then it'll be useless. You can't say, "Well, I'd like it to be like this or I'd like it to be like that." You just have to look at what's there.

With truths of the will, though—things like wanting to develop a skill—the skill won't become a truth unless you want it to. In this case, the will has to be there. But for it to be a genuine skill, you have to have the ability both to be ardent *and* to evaluate very carefully. In other words, be honest with yourself when things are not going well, but at the same time not so down on yourself that you think that the honest thing is always to say that things aren't any good or you're not any good. That kind of honesty is not really helpful. You have to learn a balance in your evaluation, that you see what you've done it's not quite right yet,

the concentration isn't what you want yet, but at the same time you have to keep up your ardency that you want to do it well regardless.

So a lot of the skill in developing skills is learning to keep these two qualities in balance: your will and your powers of observation; your ardency and your powers of evaluation. When you learn how to master these, then when the time comes when the body and your breath—your friends here—are leaving you, you don't latch onto craving as your friend. You latch onto your mindfulness and your discernment as your friends. When there's a sense of lonely, blank greyness, you realize you're not alone. You've got something you can really depend on.

You have the opportunity to develop these qualities *now*, so make the most of it.