

## *As Days & Nights Fly Past, Fly Past*

*April 28, 2021*

There's a sutta that lists ten reflections that a person gone forth should reflect on often, every day. And one of them is, "*Katham-bhutassa me rattin-diva vitipatananti?*" "What am I becoming as days and nights fly past?" Or, as in the Thai translation, "Days and nights fly past, fly past, what am I doing right now?"

One afternoon, Ajaan Fuang posed that question. He said, "Suppose the Buddha were here in front of you and asked you that question, how would you answer?" I happened to be sitting at the time, so I told him, "Well, I'd tell him 'I'm sitting.'" He says, "That's not a good answer at all."

It's not just a question of being alert. What qualities are you developing as time passes? You can't bring time back, but you can accumulate good qualities. If you're not developing good qualities, it's a double loss: The time is gone, and even if you think you're treading water, there's a downward slope. It's like the hill near Mount Lassen that's made out of little bits of lava. You can walk up the hill, but it's fairly steep, and every now and then you stop to rest, and you realize that as you're resting, you're sliding down.

That's the way it is with time. So what can you do to make sure that you're still climbing, climbing? There's another place where the Buddha lists six qualities that you should look for in yourself, what he calls, "having a sense of yourself."

The first quality is conviction: Is your conviction in the path growing? You know by looking at your virtue, which is another one of the qualities: Are you strict with yourself with the precepts, or do you find yourself getting lax about little things? This is especially relevant for the monks: We have lots of little precepts, and sometimes it's easy to say, "Oh, it's a little one, it doesn't matter." But as Ajaan Mun told Ajaan Fuang one time when Ajaan Fuang was young, "People don't get big logs in their eyes, or it's very rare, but they can easily get sawdust in their eyes, and it can blind them."

In other words, it's very rare that we would break one of the big precepts, but it's very easy to break little ones. As one gets broken, another gets broken, and it gets easy to break still another one. So you have to be convinced that we're here to work on our precepts, work on our concentration, work on our discernment—that all the energy that goes into those skills is well spent.

Another quality you look for yourself is learning: We have the opportunity to learn more about the Dhamma. Especially now with the Internet, you can get all kinds of suttas, read lots about the Vinaya... Are you taking advantage of that?

We've got all these suttas in translation. We've got the works of the ajaans in translation. If you're going to spend some time reading—read that.

Think about it, and think about what the Buddha said: When you're listening to a Dhamma talk, how do you listen? Do you listen attentively, single-mindedly? Give it your full attention, and if there's anything of value, try to memorize it. As you memorize it, you think it over, see how it fits in with what you've learned so far, because when you see that it fits, that's when you become more willing to practice it.

So, you don't just read, read, read. You read and you think. You think and you mull it over—until you feel inspired to practice. Then you can put the book down. Go sit and meditate, go do walking meditation. Because that's the whole purpose of the reading: to inspire you to practice and to give you some insight on what you can do as you practice.

I found in my own practice that there were times when I didn't want to read anything at all, I just wanted to practice. Then I'd come up against a problem, and the problem was often very ill-defined. I knew that something was wrong, something didn't seem to make sense, so I'd read what I could.

We didn't have much back in those days. There were very few books by the forest ajaans, almost nothing in terms of the sutta translations. So for me, often it meant going back and reading Ajaan Lee again and again.

His books are especially good in that you read them now, put them down, you practice. Come back to them in a few months, and you'll see other things that you didn't see before. When you've reached a point where you feel inspired to practice, okay, put the books down. Come back to them again when you need them. It's an ongoing dialogue between the Dhamma that's been written down and your practice—that's the ideal way to read, the ideal way to learn.

The next quality to look for yourself is generosity: How generous are you with your time? We all have our chores here at the monastery. Sometimes there's a sense that each of us feels that we're pulling more than other people are. In some cases, it's true; some cases it's not. But even if you're pulling more, why let your generosity be measured by other people's generosity?

If you have a little extra energy, there are lots of little things we can do to help one another. It creates a better atmosphere in the community if you see generosity not as an imposition, but as an opportunity. The fact that something is not being done, you see that it can be done, you have the energy and the time—you do it.

The feeling that comes from that is much better than having been assigned to that particular task. When you realize you live in a community where things are done voluntarily, that makes it a different kind of community, a different kind of

atmosphere. As the Buddha said, it's one of the bases for having the group get along peacefully, with a sense of friendliness. When you have that kind of atmosphere, it's a lot easier to practice, a lot easier to get the mind settled in concentration with a sense of well-being.

The fifth quality the Buddha has you look for is discernment: To what extent do you see that you're creating suffering that you don't have to? That's *the* big question. When the Buddha set out the four noble truths he wasn't simply setting out four interesting facts about an interesting topic—suffering and stress. He was pointing out the fact that this is *the* big issue in life—the suffering and stress that we're causing ourselves—and that we don't have to.

The fact that we're causing it doesn't mean that we're stuck there, because we also have the qualities within ourselves, or the potentials within ourselves, that allow us to learn how not to do that. As the Buddha pointed out, once you take care of that suffering, then there's nothing to weigh down the mind.

But before you get to that ultimate stage, you have to look for the little ways in which you're creating yourself suffering: the way you talk to yourself; the thoughts that you latch on to. To what extent are you dwelling in the past? It's very easy during a lockdown like this, where you find yourself spending more and more time with yourself, with fewer and fewer opportunities for doing other things to distract yourself. You start digging up old issues. Remember: Those days and nights have flown past. In some cases, it's just as well they've flown past and are gone.

If you can learn a lesson from what mistakes you made, okay, learn the lesson, and then move on. Because time is moving on, and you don't want to waste right now, because you do have this opportunity to develop these good qualities.

The last quality, *patibhāna*, can be translated as *quick-wittedness*, or *ingenuity*. Those first five qualities are not only the qualities the Buddha has you look for in yourself day after day, they're also the qualities that can make you a deva. In fact, when you reflect on that and you realize that you have some goodness to you, that should be uplifting. But then we move on to *patibhāna*: quick-wittedness, ingenuity. This is where you go *beyond*—where you learn to look not only at your defilements, but to turn around and look at: Who's doing the looking?

We had a monk in Bangkok visit us one time, and one evening he was sitting on the porch of Ajaan Fuang's hut. The sun was particularly golden as it was about to set. Streams of golden light were cast across the valley, and he commented, "This place is really quite beautiful." Ajaan Fuang immediately said, "Who's saying that it's beautiful? Look at that." In other words, keep looking back at your mind.

This is when you're quick-witted: You turn and look at the mind to see what it's doing. It's all too easy to get into a state of mind, and then be blinded by the state that you're in. You take on a point of view and don't realize what you're doing. Always look at what you're doing. Have that reflective quality.

And look for patterns: That's the other part of ingenuity. Aristotle defined intelligence as the ability to see connections that no one else has pointed out to you. That means, on the one hand, seeing differences, which is what discernment is about, but also seeing patterns in how different things are causally connected. That way, what you've learned in one skill you can apply to the skill of the mind.

This is why the ajaans—Ajaan Lee in particular—were so good at analogies: analogies for the skilled mind, analogies for the foolish mind. They'd seen those patterns in themselves and were able to use those patterns to teach themselves.

This is where you make the Dhamma your own. You become not just a Dhamma consumer, but also a Dhamma producer. Of course, the first person to consume your Dhamma should be you, to put that Dhamma to the test. You should be the one who's benefiting. Maybe someday other people can benefit from your Dhamma production, but right now this is what you want to become—someone who can produce the Dhamma whenever it's needed.

Because we're not here just to memorize and worship the Buddha's words. We're here to apply them to our own problem of suffering—and that means we have to learn how to adjust them to our problems. You see where he sets forth riddles in his teachings—in other words, poses questions and doesn't answer them. You see him doing that every now and then: He'll say something to the monks and then get up and go into his hut without explaining anything.

In some cases, they go off and they ask some of the other monks for an explanation, but the Buddha could also be challenging them: How do you make sense out of this? How does this apply to you? It's through this quality of ingenuity that the Dhamma really does become your own, and it solves your own problem, so that what you become as days and nights fly past is something you'd be proud to show to the Buddha.

Remember what kind of person he was: We've read his story, and he was a noble warrior, in all senses of those words. There was a fierceness to his determination. And he wasn't the sort of person who would be blinded by people's attempts to hide things. He could see right through people.

So if the Buddha were ever to ask you, "Days and nights fly past, fly past: What are you becoming?" you want to be able to give him an honest answer that you'd be proud to give.