Events In & Of Themselves

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John Suwat often began his talks by saying, “When you meditate, meditate with an attitude of respect, an attitude of confidence in what you’re doing.” In other words, give it all your attention. Pay careful attention to what’s going on. As for the other things in the world, you can let them go. Your frame of reference is the body right here. The body in and of itself. In other words, it’s not the body as you normally think of it in the world. Whether it’s strong enough to do the work you’ve got to do, good-looking enough to attract the people you’d like to attract, those are issues of the body in the world. As for the body in itself, what do you have here? It’s just the breath coming in and going out. The fact that the body is sitting here, that your awareness of the body is made out of feelings of warmth, coolness, emotion, heaviness. That’s pretty much it. It’s made out of 32 different parts. Actually, there are a lot more parts, but those are the ones back in the time of the Buddha that were considered to be the troublemakers, the parts of the body that would cause disease. You’re living in this pile of disease potential. All kinds of things could happen to the body once you have a leg. The leg can get cut off. When you have arms, the arms can get cut off. If you don’t have legs, you don’t have arms, and there’s no possibility that they’re getting cut off. But the body has these things. Ajahn Suwat was giving a Dharma talk one time, and he said, “If you don’t believe that the body is just open for the potential of suffering, just take an iron stake and you can poke it anywhere in the body, and you’ll cause pain.” This was at a retreat. I went with a lot of Americans, and they all laughed when they heard that. He gave me a funny look when they laughed. “How would I change this teaching?” I had to explain to them that it was something most people hadn’t thought of before. It took them by surprise. But it shouldn’t, because this is the nature of the body. When you really look at it, you see that there’s not all that much to get excited about. We work so hard to keep the body going, and yet what does it do? It gets sick on us without asking permission. Then eventually it dies, no matter how well you care for it. I once read of a place in Utah where they had worked out a process of mummification. They were having people signing up to have their bodies mummified after they died. There was a couple of people who said, very frankly, that they had worked so hard to keep their bodies fit and healthy that it would be a shame to allow them to deteriorate after they died. I mean, that’s real delusion, as if it would accomplish anything at all to keep the body undeteriorated. It’s the nature of the body. So the question is, what are you going to do with it? Nobody doesn’t recommend neglecting it. He says, “Take care of it, but take care of it to the point where it’s a useful vehicle for the practice.” So always keep that perspective in mind, that if you think of the body as an end in and of itself, where does that end? It ends in death. But if you think of it as a tool, then you take care of it to the point where it’s useful as a part of the path in training the mind. So when you get this perspective on the body in and of itself, it helps clear away a lot of other issues that would normally come in and clutter up your mind. Keep remembering, the body ends in death. Death as a topic is a great conversation stopper, not only outside, but also within your mind. As you start getting tied up in this issue and that issue, worried about this, worried about that, engrossed in this, engrossed in that, remind yourself, okay, you could die at any point, and at that point, all that worry and all that engrossment is going to be for nothing. That helps to loosen up your attachment to those thoughts. And when you loosen up your attachment, it also helps to loosen up the suffering, the burdensomeness of those thoughts. Remind yourself, if you survive, what are you going to do? That’s a big if. We tend to forget it. We push it out of our minds because we tend to think there’s really nothing much you can do about death. The Buddha taught, though, that there are skillful and unskillful ways of dying. This is a lot of what our practice is about. It’s about getting a perspective on our life. So we live our life skillfully, and when the time comes to go, we die skillfully. This is why contemplation of death is a very good topic for overcoming complacency, overcoming heedlessness. There’s a passage in the Canon where the Buddha says, “Every evening as the sun sets,” we had that beautiful sunset this evening. He said, “Don’t get tied up in how beautiful the sunset is. Remind yourself, that could be your very last sunset. You could die tonight.” All kinds of things could happen to the body. You go out into the grove and it turns out there’s a snake who didn’t know it was supposed to go to sleep at night. It happens to be lying in wait under the leaves. One bite and you’re gone. Or even inside your own body, those thirty-two parts that can cause disease. Something sudden might happen. Are you ready to go? If not, what remains to be done? Well, for one thing, you’ve got to work on your mindfulness, work on your alertness, so that if you do go, you go well-armed, you go prepared. And that kind of thinking leads you where? It leads you right back to the breath here in the present moment. And the Buddha said, “When the sun sets, don’t get caught up in the beauty of the sunrise.” Again, don’t get caught up in the beauty of the sunrise. Remind yourself, this could be your last sunrise, this could be your last day. Are you ready? If not, what can you do to get ready? What do you need to do to get ready? Once again, straighten out your mind, because your mind is what’s going to have to handle the whole process of dying and then survive it. And you want it to survive it in good shape. They say that when a person dies, two kinds of things come. One is called the kamma-nimitta, which is a vision that may have to do with actions you’ve done during your life, good or bad, which, if you’re not careful, can pull you in the wrong direction. This is one of the reasons why you practice meditation. It’s to keep the mind from getting snared on thoughts that come wandering into the mind. Just stay with the breath, no matter what. No matter how enticing or interesting or compelling the thought may be. You want to stay with the breath. So at that point, when you’re actually leaving the body, you don’t want to jump onto some thought that’s going to put the mind in bad shape. Either thoughts of the kamma-nimitta, which is the image of the past, or what they call gati-nimitta, which is a vision of where you might be going. If you have to be reborn, try to choose a good place. Again, this requires a lot of mindfulness, a lot of alertness. So basically, the important thing is that you’re not afraid of dying. Everybody’s going to have to do it. What you have to be afraid of is not handling it properly when it comes. And that’s something you can work on. This little exercise we’re working on right now, staying with the breath, is the mindfulness and alertness that are going to be the long-term benefits. So whatever techniques you have in making the breath comfortable, so it’s easy to stay with the breath, so you can keep mindfulness continuous, and so you feel less and less inclined to go wandering off with whatever thoughts come wandering into the mind. That’s a useful skill. And it’s important to remind yourself of the importance of these skills so that the incidents of daily life don’t overwhelm you. And don’t lose your perspective. Because at that point, what will you have? Well, you have the body in and of itself here. As long as you can stay with the body in and of itself, then you can handle things properly. The same with feelings in and of themselves. There’ll be pain, probably. It might be extreme pain. Some people feel very little pain, but for most people, it’s an extremely painful experience. Again, just see the pain in and of itself. Remind yourself that your awareness is something separate. There are mind states in and of themselves, mental qualities in and of themselves. In other words, at that point, you don’t want to think of them as signs pointing someplace else. Just look at them as events in and of themselves. When you keep that perspective, then you can handle them. If you start getting tied up into narratives of how you don’t want to leave this particular lifetime or don’t want to leave this particular body or regrets about things you did or regrets about things you didn’t get a chance to do, those narratives are going to push and pull you all in the wrong directions. But if you can maintain this perspective here, this frame of reference, the body in and of itself, feelings, mind states, mental qualities in and of themselves, then you can handle them. You say, “Oh, there’s another one. There’s another one of those things.” It all becomes a very ordinary process. Even though the body may not survive the process, the mindfulness can. The good qualities of the mind can. So the time and energy invested in developing these good qualities is always well spent. So it’s important that you keep this in and of itself. This frame of reference, as much as you can. It’s especially important when you have to leave the monastery and go back out to the outside world, that you don’t let the perspective of the outside world overwhelm this inner perspective you’re trying to develop. You want to be able to tap into this whenever you need it, because this is what gives you perspective on all the other issues of life. Remember, their importance is secondary to this. Of course, they’ll clamor for attention and claim all sorts of importance, but you’ve got to learn not to listen to those messages. Because when the time comes, when you’re really ill, when you grow old, and when you have to die, are those things going to help you? Not really. Even doctors, whose job it is to look after you when you get ill and get old and are ready to die, there comes a point where they have to throw up their hands and say, “Well, I’m sorry, that’s all we can do for you.” At that point, you’re on your own. And if you’ve developed these skills, then you don’t have to worry. You know you can handle it. Which is why these skills have to have primary importance, and the ability to tap into this perspective, the present in and of itself, events in the present in and of themselves, simply as events without many layers of meaning and narrative connections. That’s your release right here in the present moment. In Jhana Mahaprabhu, it talks about how when you’re sitting in meditation, you get to these points where there’s a lot of pain in the body. One way of escape is just to get up and go away, but another is to say, “I’m going to sit here with the pain, but I’m going to find release in the midst of the pain.” What does that mean? It means you have to change your perspective on the pain. You can’t go anywhere. But right here, he says, you can start dividing things up. Which sensations are body sensations? Which ones are pain sensations? Which is the awareness? Can you be clear on the distinctions among them? So even though you’re sitting here in the midst of the pain, if you’re sitting with the awareness rather than with the pain, it doesn’t have to tell you. It doesn’t have to touch you. So seeing these things as events in and of themselves is precisely the perspective that gives you freedom, not only when you die, but also while you’re here alive. You can sit in the middle of all kinds of events here in the monastery, out there in the world, and not get caught up in those little worlds that everybody else is getting caught up in, because you have your in-and-of-itself frame of reference. Just body, just events—mental events, physical events—just in and of themselves. When you can keep that perspective, it cuts through a lot of the narrative tissue, all those connections that can create so much suffering, like gum that connects everything. It just cuts right through it. Nothing’s still. So learn how to value this type of perspective and realize that you can tap into it anytime at all, because it’s always there. It’s a question of how much you want to pile on to things, your experience of the present moment. The less you pile on, the closer you are to this perspective. The closer you are to this perspective, the more freedom there is, and the more you’re free to do anything. So learn how to appreciate this perspective, as Ajahn Swa would say. Learn how to have respect for it. Have confidence in it. It may not seem like much, but as you get more and more familiar with it, more skilled at reaching it, you find that it has a lot of potential for cutting through all kinds of suffering. So here you are, breath in and of itself. It doesn’t seem like much, but it’s the in-and-of-itself-ness of it. That’s where your hope lies.

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