Examined Life, An

September 3, 2005

We’re all going to die someday. If you look around you, there’s going to be a funeral for every single person in this room, and for the people sitting outside as well. We don’t like to think about that. But still, each of us knows that we’re going to die. And one of the great ironies of life is that we pretend that we don’t know that. We live our lives completely oblivious to the fact that they’re going to end someday. Most of us choose to push thoughts of death out of our mind. We feel there’s nothing much we can do about it. It’s so completely random. We have no idea when it’s going to happen. And thinking about it is morbid and depressing, so let’s just not think about it. But it’s such a common fact that in order not to think about it, you have to stuff your mind full of all kinds of other thoughts. Many of us feel that the more thoughts we can stuff into the mind, the further we can keep thoughts of death at bay. So it becomes a habit. Not only multitasking outside, but multitasking inside as well. It’s a whole committee in there. Everybody’s jabbering away for fear that there’s going to be a moment of silence. That’s one way of looking at death. The other way is to realize that there are things you can do to prepare. In other words, there are skillful and unskillful ways of living, skillful and unskillful ways of dying. I’ve seen this in my own life. I’ve seen two teachers of mine die, and I’ve also seen my father die. I’ve seen them approach death. People who’ve been meditating approach death with a lot more mindfulness, a lot more alertness, a lot less fear, much more in charge of the situation than those who don’t meditate. They’ve learned to allow their minds to grow quiet, and they’re comfortable with the quietness in the mind. They don’t keep running away from it. They realize that when the mind is quiet, it’s not a vacuum. It’s actually a lot more solid, a lot more secure than the mind that’s filling itself up with thoughts. So an important part of any well-examined life is taking some time off to look at your life. Ask yourself where you’re going and what it’s going to accomplish. When you can pull out of the rat race for a while, come out to a place where you can sit quietly and look at your life, look at the life of the people around you. The Buddha compares it to getting up in a tower and looking down on the people below. You see them scurrying around. There’s a lot of scurrying and there’s a lot of busyness, but it doesn’t really accomplish that much. There’s so much conflict and so much heartbreak, and you wonder, “Is it all worth it?” Some people will say, “Well, that’s all there is.” So just immerse yourself in it. But the Buddha said, “No, that’s not all there is. There’s something more.” When the mind is trained, it opens up to a real solidity inside, something really dependable, a true refuge inside that’s of real essence, something really solid. He compares it to the heartwood of a tree. It’s a sort of thing that can stay totally untouched by aging, illness, and death. So think about your life. You realize that you’ve got that choice. Are you going to spend all your time scurrying around, or are you going to spend some time looking for this core, this solidity inside? Think about this a lot when you have trouble getting the mind to settle down in meditation. It doesn’t seem to want to stay with the breath. It’s filled with all kinds of other thinking. Tell yourself, “Well, as long as the mind is going to think, let’s think in this direction. What’s really worth thinking about? What’s not?” When you think about it, it will help actually lead to a good, solid happiness. It will lead to a happiness that just vanishes in your hand, like trying to catch hold of a mirage. That, the Buddha says, is where real wisdom starts. It’s when you decide that you want to work towards a happiness that lasts, something that’s solid and secure. Then when you think in these terms and you see thoughts popping up in the mind, ask yourself, “If I followed those thoughts, where would they go? Where would they lead me?” This, the Buddha said, is the important first step in the practice. It’s stepping out of your thoughts a little bit and looking at them, not in terms so much of their content as part of a chain of cause and effect. Where are they going to go? Where do they lead? Some thoughts, he said, are skillful. They actually lead to happiness. Long-term happiness. Others are unskillful. They may lead to a short-term happiness, but they turn into something else afterwards. And that something else is not happiness. Now, to keep yourself from getting pulled away by them, it’s good to have a physical anchor. That’s when we focus on the breath, focus on the body. Because if you use simply one thought to deal with another or watch another thought, it’s very easy to get swept along the current. But if you can have at least part of your awareness with the breath, that gives you your standpoint. That’s your tower to watch these thoughts. Even if you can’t keep all of your awareness or all of your attention with the breath, at least have some of it with the breath. That helps keep you anchored in the present moment. Be very honest with yourself about these thoughts. Where are they really going to go? Suppose you were very successful in business, very successful in art, very successful in whatever career you choose. How far can that take you? The Buddha pointed out that the most important skills in life are the ones that deal just with the issue of aging, illness, and death. And yet so many of the skills and so much of the knowledge we pick up totally avoids those issues and then runs slam up against them when they come, because they’re going to come. And so when you apply a really level gaze to your thinking, after all, it becomes less and less and less attractive, less compelling. And the idea of being quiet, of being still, so you can really watch what’s going on in the mind, gain some control over it, that gets more and more appealing. This is called using discernment to foster concentration. Some people find it easy for the mind to settle down. Other people don’t. It’s like a tree. If the tree is out in the middle of a field and no other trees are around, it’s very easy to cut it down because it’s not entangled with anything else. But if a tree is in a forest and its branches are entangled with the branches of the other trees in the forest, it takes a lot of work to cut it down. You have to cut this branch, cut that branch, figure out which direction it can fall. In other words, you have to use your discernment in order to cut away a lot of the mind’s attachments before it’s even willing to settle down. So try to think about these issues if you find the mind running rampant. As the chant just now said, the world is swept away. It does not endure. Everything is very, very impermanent. This comes from a sutta where an old king is asking a young monk, “Why did you ordain?” The young monk says, “Well, the first thing I reflected on was that the world is swept away.” The king says, “Well, what do you mean?” The monk asks him a question in return. He says, “When you were young, were you strong?” The king says, “Yes, very strong. Sometimes I felt like I had the strength of two men, three men.” “How about now?” “Oh, no, now,” the king says, “I’m eighty years old. Sometimes I think to put my foot in one place and it goes in another place.” You lose control over your body. And as the body grows old, it doesn’t ask your permission to grow old first. The world offers no shelter. That’s the next contemplation. The king says, “What do you mean the world offers no shelter? I’ve got troops and I’ve got money to protect me from all kinds of things.” “Do you have any illnesses?” The king says, “Yes. Sometimes the illnesses get so bad that everybody around me thinks I’m going to die.” The monk asks him, “Well, when you’re that ill and there’s a lot of pain, can you ask all your courtiers and all these other people who live under your control, can you ask them to share out the pain so that you’ll feel less pain?” The king says, “No, I’ve got to feel it all myself.” The monk says, “That’s what this contemplation means. The world offers no shelter. The world has nothing of its own.” That’s the third contemplation. The king says again, “I’ve got all these treasures. What do you mean it has nothing of its own?” The monk says, “Well, when you die, can you take all those treasures with you, or do you have to leave them behind to whoever is going to take them?” The answer is obvious. The fourth contemplation is that the world is insufficient as a slave to craving. The king asks, “What does that mean?” The monk says, “Do you now rule over this prosperous country?” The king says, “Yes.” “Suppose someone were to come and say there’s another country, also prosperous, off to the east, and with the forces you have you could conquer it and enjoy the wealth of that country as well. What would you do?” The king says, “Well, I’d attack it and conquer it.” “Suppose someone were to come from the west?” The monk asks. “They’re the same news.” The king says, “Well, I’d conquer that country as well.” Here he is, eighty years old, and he’s going to keep conquering countries. Messengers from the south, messengers from the north, even messengers from across the ocean come with news that there are these other countries that are also prosperous. In other words, you never have enough. You just keep asking for more. As the New Yorker cartoon had it, a group of businessmen are sitting around, and one of them says, “I’m going to conquer this country.” The other says, “I’m going to conquer that country.” So you can ask yourself, “Where are you going? Is there any place that’s really worth following or someplace that’s not?” If it’s not, you can just drop the thought. It’ll wander around for a while, trying to attract your attention. You don’t have to snuff it out. Leave it alone. Other thoughts will come up. This will take a while. But if you apply the same perspective to all of them, after a while they get weaker and weaker, and it’s easier and easier for the mind finally to really settle down and feel at home in the present moment with a sense of ease and well-being. By cutting off paths that lead outside, the Buddha doesn’t leave you totally adrift or starve you. He says, “Actually, there’s a lot of potential wealth right here in the present moment, a lot of resources that can be developed into true happiness.” But the mind that’s not used to looking here has to be gradually trained in this direction. Before it’s willing to settle down. But it can be trained. Just be persistent. Try to maintain this perspective. Think of yourself up in a tower, looking at the world, looking at your life. Where is it coming from? Where is it going? What do I want to do with this opportunity? When you keep thinking in that way, it brings the mind to a point where it is willing to settle down and give the present moment a chance.

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