A Death in the Family

January 7, 2008

It’s a Buddhist custom, after a person has died, to think of the goodness that person did and to take it as an example. Especially if it’s someone like Yom Kippur. She set a very good example. Every day she was here. Even in the last hour of her life, she was doing good for the community. That’s a rare opportunity. A lot of people spend the last weeks, months, years of their lives and can’t do anything at all. But from the first day she came here, until this morning, when she left, it was good all the way. So think of the goodness she’s done, and then you think about your goodness. When you go, what goodness will you leave behind? You don’t have to wait until then. Build the goodness you want right now, because you never know. As in Yom Kippur’s case, it was all very sudden. When she set that pot of rice on the stove, she thought she was going to come back. So the issue is, it might be very sudden for us, too. So are you ready to go? The Buddha once said, every morning when the sun rises, “Remind yourself that this might be the last time you see the sunrise.” Are you ready to go? If not, what are you still attached to? What unfinished business do you have? Well, hurry up and finish it. It’s the same when the sun sets. This might be the last time you see the sun. Are you ready to go tonight? Whatever unfinished business there is, well, take care of it now. Don’t wait until it’s too late. The Buddha said this is what it means to be heedful. In the textbooks in Thailand, there’s what they call their Dharma Etiquette. There’s one book on religious ceremonies, and they divide the ceremonies into two types. There’s the auspicious ones and the inauspicious ones, i.e., the inauspicious ones are the ones that have to do with death. But that’s not a Buddhist way of thinking. One of the chants we chant here regularly is, “Apamaro jato me su etamangalamuttamang.” “Heedfulness in all things is a great blessing.” It’s something very auspicious. So when we come to a ceremony like this, the purpose of this is to develop heedfulness so that it is a blessing. We can make it a blessing if we become heedful, thinking about the fact that aging, illness, and death are normal. The English translation is unavoidable. The Thai translation is interesting. It can also mean that aging, illness, and death are normal. We tend to forget these things. They seem so abnormal in our lives, especially in our society where old people are put off in a place to be by themselves and nobody else sees them. Sick people are put off in another place. Dead people are put away and nobody else sees them. It all becomes very abnormal. And then when the basic facts of life stare us right in the face, it surprises us, shocks us. But the Buddha has us think every day that these things are normal, and yet you’ve got to find happiness within these things or in the midst of these things. That’s why he also includes the teaching on the fact that we have our actions as our source of happiness. The one potential for happiness is through our karma. When you realize that, you realize that every morning you’ve got a chance to do some good karma, do something good for the world. You want to take that chance, whether it’s in being generous, observing the precepts, or meditating. If you can’t do anything else, just be mindful of your breath coming in and going out. Try to keep the mind bright and clear and still in the present moment. Develop good qualities of mind. These are your treasures, whether you’re alive or whether you leave. Go to be alive someplace else. These are the best investments of your time. When someone has passed away, you make merit, either by being generous, observing the precepts, or meditating. And then you dedicate the merit to the person who has passed on. If Yom Kippur has some way of knowing, she’ll be happy to see that we’re all here meditating. She doesn’t have to worry about the monastery. She set a good example and people are following it. And at the same time, we take advantage of this opportunity to stop and think about our lives. Where are they going? The goodness you’ve built in your life, is it satisfactory yet or not? Any areas where it’s lacking? Well, you’ve got the chance now. Each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, each time you wake up, every morning, you’ve got the chance to do good. So make sure you take advantage of that opportunity. Don’t let it slip by. So let’s sit here for the rest of the hour and dedicate the merit of our goodness to add to the goodness that Yom Kippur left behind. And, as I say, that goes to meet her as well. I say that the goodness you do when you go into your next life is like relatives welcoming you. So that when you go there, it’s not like going, it’s like coming home. You’re not going to a strange place. You’re coming back to your own goodness. So try to make the goodness of your mind your home here, and you’ll always have a home wherever you go.

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