Integrity In Memory of Luang Loong

March 24, 2010

Tonight we’ve gathered in honor of Lung Lung, the monk we call Venerable Uncle. He passed away last night. He was a student of Ajaan Phuong. He’d known Ajaan Lee ever since he was a young novice. He had arranged for Ajaan Phuong to teach in Bangkok. He looked after Ajaan Phuong while he was there, and looked after me as I came and ordained in Thailand. He was the monk who shaved my head the day I ordained. He looked after me especially after Ajaan Phuong passed away, and another good person has gone. So we’ve gathered to make merit in his honor. This term, “making merit,” may sound strange in English. It sounds better in Thai. Basically what it means is that we do good in a way that leads to true happiness. Then we compound the interest by dedicating it to other people so that they may find true happiness too. It’s a way of showing gratitude in honor of the goodness that people have passed on. Officially, in the textbooks where they teach Dhamma in Thailand, they talk about a funeral as an inauspicious occasion. Actually, the Buddha never taught that. He said that any occasion that gives rise to heedfulness is an auspicious occasion. And he said that when you see a dead person, you reflect on the fact that that’s the fate of your body as well. The next question is, what do you take with you when you die, and what do you leave behind? Hopefully you take some goodness with you and leave some goodness behind. In fact, the more goodness you leave behind, the more goodness you take with you. In Luang Luang’s case, one of his outstanding virtues was his integrity, years back when he was a young monk. He’s always had this character of being very plain spoken. There were a couple of senior monks who took offense at that. One of them happened to be the meal assigner. He decided to cut Luang Luang off of the meals that the monks were invited to. Luang Luang didn’t complain. This went on for months and months. Late people would come to the monastery and they would actually specify that they wanted Luang Luang to come in their invitations, but he wouldn’t go because the meal assigner didn’t assign him. Finally, word got to the abbot. The abbot checked the books and discovered that, sure enough, the meal assigner had been unfair. So they had a meeting. They removed the meal assigner from the office, and they put Luang Luang in charge instead. Luang Luang was so honest in the way he dealt with that assignment that he kept it for the rest of his life, considering the fact that Wat Mako was a very wealthy monastery. Sometimes there’d be controversy about people who wanted a bit more than they got. But Luang Luang was so straightforward about this that he was never removed from office. And when that old meal assigner was having his final illness, it turned out Luang Luang was the only monk in the monastery who came to look after him. This is one of the characteristics of Luang Luang that we admire, that he was so reliable. So when you think of someone who’s passed away, it’s not just a matter of looking at their body and saying, “Well, that’s the fate of this body.” You look at the goodness that they left behind, and you ask yourself, “Do I have some goodness to leave behind? And what kind of goodness do I have to leave behind?” This is where a funeral becomes auspicious, when you make up your mind that you’ve got to make more effort. And what you’ve got to do is make more effort in whatever area you choose—more effort in your generosity, more effort in your virtue, more effort in your meditation. Because it’s the effort that you put into the goodness of the heart. That’s what both stays here and something that you can take with you. In the West we often think about rebirth as a very self-centered kind of teaching. The idea that my self is going to endure beyond death seems to contradict the teaching on not-self. But actually, it’s a very strong teaching on not-self. When Ratabala was talking to the king about why he had ordained, he illustrated the principle of inconstancy with aging, stress with illness, and not-self with the fact that when you pass on you have to leave everything behind. So it’s not all that consoling a thought, because all the things that you store up here on this earth in this lifetime can provide for yourself in the future. Once you leave the body, you don’t have any guarantee that that stuff is going to go with you. In fact, you’re going to have to leave it behind. It’s like suddenly being evacuated with no time to pack at all. All you take with you is your skill set. So you have to ask yourself, “What skills am I developing in terms of the perfections?” In Luang Rinpoche’s case, it was generosity. He was an extremely generous person. A couple of years back, there was a scandal around the meal assigner in another monastery in Bangkok. He’d gotten into this position and it was one of the monasteries that had a crematorium. So there were a lot of concessions that went along with the funeral business. The people provided the ice, the people provided the food, the people provided the flowers, etc., for the funerals there. This particular meal assigner had driven out all the other people who’d had the concessions and put his relatives in their place and amassed quite a lot of money. When the scandal broke, one of the newspapers in Bangkok decided to go around to all the major funeral monasteries and check out on the bank accounts of the different meal assigners. They found that Loong Loong of all of them was the poorest. Whatever had come his way, he shared. People would give him amulets, and he’d give them away. Someone once commented on how many valuable amulets he got and said, “Gee, he must have made a lot of merit in the previous lifetime.” Loong Loong said, “No, it was this lifetime.” Whatever he got, he would give away. He was generous, had integrity, and developed a lot of the perfections. That’s why we respect him. That’s why people feel a lot of affection for him. So you look at his life, and turn around and look at your life. See what ways you can develop more perfection. Maybe the word “perfection” is not a good one. It can be translated in one way as barang, the things that take you to the other side, and also paramat, things that should be foremost in your life, the skills you develop. Here, “skillful” means skills of the mind, good qualities of the mind. Those are the things you take with you, paradoxically, by leaving a lot of them behind. Giving them to the world. So try to make this an auspicious occasion. Look at your life and see what areas you can improve it, what further perfections, what further paramis you should give priority to, and what things you have to learn how to let go in order to maintain those priorities. So take this time to reflect. And as you meditate, try to make your mind one, because we’re going to be giving this meditation to lung-lung. And the more single your mind is, the more value it has. It’s like you’re going to give something as a gift. You want to make sure it’s a good gift. And the oneness of the mind is like going into a market and finding there’s only one fruit of a particular kind. Imagine there’s just one mango in the whole market. You can imagine how valuable that mango would be. If there are lots of mangoes, they sometimes end up throwing them away. Too many to sell. So don’t make your mind many right now. Make it one. So it’s a gift that you should be proud to give.

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