An Admirable Friend In Memory of Luang Loong

March 26, 2010

Bring awareness to the breath, wherever you feel it in the body, and allow it to be comfortable. As you stick with the breath, you’re developing good qualities in the mind. It’s called bhavana in Pali. Developing mindfulness, concentration, discernment, persistence. And underlying all this is conviction that this is really useful, this is really a worthwhile project, training the mind, realizing that the mind is the major factor in life, shaping your happiness and sorrow, your pleasure and pain. And that it needs to be trained so that the actions gain the happiness you want. Happiness that doesn’t harm you and doesn’t harm anybody else. And conviction that these qualities that we develop into the mind don’t just end with this life, they carry over, which is why the investment of time in the meditation is your wisest investment. And from the point of view of a trained mind, then you can look at the other issues in life—aging, illness, and death—with a lot less fear, a lot less trepidation. Realizing the reason we suffer from these things is because our minds aren’t trained, but the suffering is. The suffering is optional. There’s pain in illness, there’s pain in aging, there’s pain in death, but the suffering is optional. That’s our contribution, which means that because it is our contribution, once we’ve trained the mind, we don’t have to contribute that suffering anymore. So this is an important activity we’re engaged in here. Tonight’s the third night of chatting for lung-lung, who passed away three days ago. And it’s good to reflect, because remember, the meditation is not just awareness of the present moment. There’s an element of reflection. When the Buddha taught mindfulness, it’s not just prayer awareness. It’s full presence of mind, keeping things in mind. He compared mindfulness to a deer. It’s a gatekeeper who watches after the gate of a fortress, allowing in the people he knows and keeping out the people he doesn’t know. In the same way, the Buddha said, when you’re mindful, when you have mindfulness as your gatekeeper, you develop skillful qualities and you let go of unskillful ones. So for mindfulness to perform these functions, it has to be more than just prayer awareness, or receptivity, or non-reactive awareness. You have to keep certain things in mind. Certain standards have a basic frame of reference, and then you see how your actions do or do not fall within that frame of reference. So even though we’re told that mindfulness is a nonjudgmental faculty, it actually is the basis for your power of judgment. Judging what’s right, what’s wrong, what’s skillful, what’s not, what’s beneficial, what’s not, keeping in mind the fact that life is circumscribed by aging, illness, and death. When there’s a death in the community, it’s a time that we have to stop and think. If we haven’t been thinking, the Buddha actually tells you to reflect on death every day. When it’s someone you know well, it brings the reflection even closer to home. And you realize that death is not an impersonal thing. It strikes persons. It also makes you reflect on their lives. In Luang Lung’s case, there are a lot of good things to reflect on. He’s admirable in many ways. There’s one story he told me just recently during my last visit to Bangkok. Once, when he was a young monk, some people he knew gave him a solid gold Buddha image about three inches across at the base. They had found it while digging around in some old ruins, which back in those days was pretty commonplace. So he saw this and he realized that this wasn’t the sort of thing that he should keep. Something like this should go to the king. So he figured, well, someday he’d be able to meet the king and he’d give him the image. So he wrapped it up in tissue paper so it wouldn’t look like anything important, stuck it in his bag, and carried it around. Sometime later, he actually did have the opportunity. He was up in a mountain up in northern Thailand where the king had an opium crop replacement project going. Luang Lung was visiting there with some laypeople, and it so happened that the king came in in a helicopter. So Luang Lung left the group he was with and went over and sat alone under a tree. The king saw him, came over, and bowed down. Luang Lung handed him the image. The king unwrapped the tissue and said, “This is gold.” Luang Lung said, “I know.” So the king pulled out his notebook and jotted down the details of where it was found. He had some retainers following him. In the Kassama time, a lot of people do like to give things to the king. The king’s retainers then take those things from the king so he doesn’t have to carry them around. So someone was standing behind the king with his hands outstretched waiting for the image, and the king didn’t give it to him. It stuck in his own pocket. But this is very typical of Luang Lung. He’d get good things and he’d want to give them away. He didn’t hoard things. He wasn’t greedy, even though he lived in a very wealthy monastery in Bangkok. He didn’t have much. The monk who was looking after him towards the last months of his life was really concerned about this. People would give donations for Luang Lung’s illness to help with the cost of the medicine. Luang Lung would use the money to give gifts, basically give it away. So he had to actually hide from him the amount of money that was in his account. He kept it in a separate account. Now, of course, if the money had been kept, it wouldn’t do him any good. You see the wisdom of generosity. As John Lee used to say, it’s like getting a coconut. You squeeze the milk out of the coconut flesh and you throw the dregs away. You take the milk. In the same way, when you give something away, you’ve basically squeezed all the good out of that thing. The object itself is like the dregs. The goodness you get is the goodness of the heart. That’s the coconut milk. So it’s good to think about this to keep our priorities straight, even if we’re not ready yet for the total application of the teaching on not-self to all aspects of your experience. It’s good to begin by having this attitude that you’re in a situation where at any moment you’ll be forced to evacuate and they won’t give you any time to pack your bags. You just go with your skill set. The good qualities you’ve developed in the mind, this is what bhavana means, is to develop. So you reflect on the lives of good people who’ve gone before. This is how wise people behave. They learn to let go of the things that they have to leave behind. Squeeze the coconut milk out of them. This is a Friday night. There are all kinds of things we could be doing on a Friday night, but we’re here focusing on our breath. Squeeze some concentration. Squeeze some mindfulness. Squeeze some discernment out of the fact that we have a body that can breathe and a mind that can think and be aware. Taking these very basic qualities and gaining the most from them. At the same time, we do this to dedicate the merit to those who’ve gone before, the people who’ve inspired us. As the Buddha once said, “Without the friendship of admirable people, we’d be nowhere.” It’s because they’ve shown us a good example of how to behave, how to think, how to be and how to talk, how to act, that we have some sense of what’s really worthwhile in life. And it’s a virtue in us that we recognize that goodness and we try to repay the people who’ve gone before and also emulate them in our actions. So tonight, at the end of the meditation, dedicate the merit to Luang Luang. Because without people like him, we’re nowhere. And the best way to carry on their influence is to embody it in our thoughts, our words, our deeds. So we have something to pass on to the next generation. This is one way of looking forward and looking back, trying to carry on what’s worthwhile from the past and make sure it gets delivered into the future. By focusing on the present right now.

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