In Memoriam

July 27, 2020

One of the things that makes us human is that we care about those who have passed away. I was reading about a group of French explorers who went to stay overwintered in Antarctica one time, and they decided to make their camp near a penguin rookery. That’s a source of food, in case they needed it. Sometimes they’d steal the eggs, and sometimes they’d kill the penguins. Make pâté. One of the strange things they noticed was that if you killed a penguin quietly, the neighbors didn’t notice. You could walk in the next day to the penguin right next to the penguin who’d been killed, and they wouldn’t be afraid. With human beings, you can’t do that. Or at least, human beings who really are human. You have a sense of loss. You appreciate the role that those people played in your lives, and you want to commemorate it. You want to express it. I received news this morning that the woman who had helped sponsor my very first ordination back into Utiah, back in 1974, passed away yesterday, or maybe this morning. She lived to be over a hundred. It almost seemed like every time I’d go to Thailand and visit her, she was a permanent fixture of the country. It’s hard to imagine Thailand without her. I first met her through her son. He’d been a student at Chiang Mai University when I was teaching there. And very early on, he’d invited me to his home. His brother was going to be ordained, and he thought it’d be nice to expose the Westerner toward ordination. So I went, and a whole group of us went. And I struck up a relationship with the family. Whenever I had some holidays on my way down to see the family, or some other part of Thailand, I’d always stop off and visit the family. They discovered that I was interested in Buddhism, and so the mother and her brother offered to sponsor my ordination. That was how I got ordained the first time. One of the qualities I think about when I think about her is her generosity. They accepted me into their home almost as if I was a part of the family. Remember the last time I saw her, last December? We asked her, you know, she’s approaching a hundred at that point. Her health was failing. She was still lucid. We asked her, “What do you still want? What would you like?” And she said, “Money.” I said, “What do you want money for?” She said, “To make merit.” She’d been a nurse. She’d lost her husband when she was in her early thirties. At that point, they had lived on a little raft on the river there. One day there was a flood, and the youngest son, the one who I came to know as a student, was on the deck of the raft and fell into the water. The father jumped in to save the kid. He was able to save the child, but a log being carried down by the water slammed into his ribcage. A few days later, he died. So she had to raise the children alone. She was a public health nurse, ran the clinic in what at that point was a little tiny town. I remember talking to other people there in the neighborhood, and they were always talking about how generous she was. So now she’s gone. She’s moved on. But it’s a good thing about her. It’s a good thing about her generosity, because you think about the good things of the people who’ve passed away. And it reminds you that that’s why other people will want to remember you, because of the good things you’ve done. There’s a tradition in Thailand that there are two types of merit-making ceremonies, those that are auspicious and those that are inauspicious. The inauspicious ones are the ones that have to do with death. But the idea that those kinds of merit-making ceremonies are inauspicious has nothing to do with Buddhism at all. It’s more of a Brahmanical idea. As the Buddha said, you should think about the people who’ve passed away. You remind yourself it’s going to happen to you someday. That should give rise to a sense of heedfulness. You don’t know how much time you have. So what are you going to do with the time you’ve got? What are you going to do with it right now? If you can think in those terms, it’s auspicious. Just think about the larger terms. Birth, aging, illness, death. Rebirth, re-aging, re-illness, re-death. What do you have to show for all that? And what will you have that you can depend on when you have to go through these things? The only thing that’s more certain than death is the karma you created, good or bad. So you want to make sure you create some good karma, not only with the meditation but with the whole practice. You have to remember that the technique is part of the meditation, but it’s not everything. And also, it’s not nothing. I was listening to Dhamma talk the other day. He was very much down on the idea that meditation was about a technique. But you’ve got to have the technique. You need to give the mind something to do, and then you can observe it as it’s actually doing something systematically. You stay with the breath. You get really familiar with the breath as you clean up the mind around the breath. It’s like cleaning up the monastery, the areas that you clean every day. You get really familiar with them. They need a little bit of dirt or dust that comes in, you know. Well, it’s the same with the mind. If you just let things come and go in the mind without trying to clean them out, you’re never really going to get familiar with the mind. So the technique is important, but it’s not everything. Remember, we’re developing good qualities in the mind, and it’s those qualities that will carry through. The Buddha himself taught the list of seven noble treasures. He says that these are the treasures that nobody can take away. Fire can’t burn them. Floods can’t wash them away. Nobody can steal them from you. You’ve got a virtue, a sense of shame, a sense of compunction, conviction, learning, generosity, and discernment. Many of these things are also qualities that can guarantee a rebirth in heaven. As the Buddha said, the good things you develop in the mind will be there on the other side when you have to leave the body. These things don’t leave you. They will welcome you. He says, “Like relatives welcoming someone who’s been away for a long time and has finally come home.” So you want to be on good terms with these qualities. Let’s just think about Yo Man Si. That was her name, Man Si Mino Yen. This sense of being a relative came from a sense of trust. And this sense of trust, as the Buddha said, is the highest state of being a relative. It doesn’t have to depend on blood. It depends on a sense of trust. And you make yourself trustworthy as you develop good qualities. And you want to have a sense of trust in your good qualities. You want your good qualities to trust in you. In other words, that you’ll always be there for them. You don’t just let them slide. So think about the good qualities you’ve got. And think about the good qualities you don’t yet have or you have that are still weak. And what can you do to use your strengths to help shore up your weaknesses? That’s a good theme for meditation. You don’t spend all your time focusing on the present moment. You’ve got to plan. You have to have a sense of direction, as the Buddha said, the self rightly directed. This is a great blessing. This is how you give a blessing to yourself, giving yourself direction. So that when you pass away, other people will be sad to see you go. I’d like to talk about your good qualities. But even better, you’ll have those good qualities. It’s one of the big paradoxes of death and rebirth. The goodness you leave behind in the world is the goodness that goes with you. The good things that you try to grab to yourself—in other words, things outside—those have to get left behind. So leave some goodness in the world through your good qualities, and the benefits will be felt all around.

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