To Go Well

July 11, 2021

In English, when we talk about the mind getting into concentration, we say that it’s settling in. In Thai, they say we’re lifting it up. We remind ourselves that the nature of the mind, this nature, this knowing element, this consciousness element, is something capable of knowing all kinds of things. So instead of using it to know just the normal issues of day-in, day-out life, let’s use it to know something that’s going to be of much higher value, much more long-lasting value. Because the affairs of the day, they come and they go, they come and they go. But if you don’t step back, look at the length of your life, look at the mind, what’s coming along the way, and you don’t get prepared, then when the time comes when you have to leave this body, you’ll have a mind that’s just attached to the little things of life here, and it’s going to be hard to let go. But if you learn how to let go, you want to look into the mind itself to see what it’s doing, to understand it so that it doesn’t fool you in important times in life. Then when the time comes to let go, it’s a lot easier, and you can let go with a lot more skill. Because this world we live in is not a world for living or staying. It’s a world for passing through. But as we pass through, we want to pick up some good things to take with us and then leave some good things behind. In fact, that’s what it is. The good things we leave behind are the good things we take with us. The things that we try to hold on to, those get ripped from our grasp. But if you do some good and leave it in the world, do some good for your mind, that goodness goes with you. So you’re going to ask yourself, “What were you born for?” And John Vung said, one of the few times he gave a Dhamma talk that was recorded, “Remind yourself, the Buddha was born all those many, many lifetimes, every time he was born for the perfections. That was his purpose in taking birth. Now, we may have taken birth with some other purpose, but we can make that our purpose now, to develop perfection, starting with the perfection of determination. We’re going to do something good with our lives. Determination is basically an intention that overrides other intentions. In other words, it’s an intention that you give priority to. You can think of it as an intention that should have a VIP pass, no matter how long the lines, it goes to the front of the line. Because you’ve thought about it and realized,”Okay, this is where you want your mind to go.” You don’t want to waste it with little things. And you can be determined to develop any of the perfections, discernment, truth, goodwill, virtue, renunciation, generosity, equanimity, patience. These are all good things to develop, all good things to take with you. The most important, though, is discernment. Because discernment is what makes the difference between living a life creating suffering and living a life putting an end to suffering. As the Buddha said, “Suffering is five clinging aggregates.” So we have to learn to comprehend these things. The best way to comprehend them is to make something good out of them, like when you’re meditating right here. You’ve got the form aggregate, which is the body sitting here, breathing in and breathing out. You’ve got the feeling aggregate, which is feelings of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. In this case, you’ve got the breath coming in and going out. That’s form. You’ve got the feelings of pleasure that come when you work with the breath. That’s feeling. You have the perceptions with which the mind talks to itself. It points out, “This is where the breath comes in. This is where the breath goes out. This is where it can run in the body.” And then the real talking to itself, that’s fabrication. When you say, “Is this breath good or is it not good? What can be done to make it better?” Once it’s better, how do you maintain it? And when you maintain it, how can you maximize the pleasure and let it spread throughout the body? Then finally, there’s consciousness, which is the awareness of all these things. When you’re getting the mind into concentration, you’re getting hands-on experience with all five aggregates. So you realize that even though the names may seem foreign, they’re actually what’s going on in your mind right now. And you can learn how to shape them in a skillful way so that you can really understand them. When you understand them, you’re much less likely to fall for them. This is what I said. If you deal with the aggregates in ignorance, it’s going to be suffering. If you deal with knowledge, it’s part of the path. So here’s a chance to get to know these factors of the mind directly, right here, right now. So later down the line, they don’t fool you. Because this is what happens. As we approach death, the body gets weak. The mind starts grasping after this, grasping after that. And if it doesn’t understand its habit of grasping, it can grasp for all kinds of bad things. This is why even though rebirth is determined by craving, our cravings can take us to places we don’t really want to go. Because at that point, we’re not thinking about consequences, we’re not thinking about the long-term. We’re just thinking about, “I’ve got to get out of this. What’s the nearest thing I can grab onto?” But if you understand these aggregates, then you can be more picky, more choosy, thinking, “Which ones are going to lead to a good destination? Which ones are going to lead beyond destinations?” The better you know them, the more you can be in charge at that point. In this way, you’re developing a skill that’s going to be useful for a long time to come and give long-term benefits. So take some time to think. What do you want to accomplish in this life? What do you want to be able to take with you? It’s not that you just take. You leave good things in the world. Well, that goodness follows you, but you’ve also left some goodness in the world. As I said, this is not a world to settle in on. It’s not really your real home. The real home, as the Buddha says, is vihara-dhamma, the qualities in the mind that you use as the mind’s dwelling. That’s your home. So we build that home out of concentration, we build it out of discernment. So when this body that we’re sojourning through right now doesn’t let us stay here any longer, we still have a good place to live. And we’ll have it because we’ve come to know the mind really well, which is the best use of this knowing quality that we have. So don’t fritter away your energy, fritter away your intelligence with things of no value. Don’t waste your time trying to make this world a place where you think you’ll settle in. This place that you pass through, you want to pass through comfortably, with strength and well-being. But spend most of your time focused on the part that goes with you—in other words, the state of the mind. Make sure that that’s a good place to stay. I’ve seen so many people in hospital. Their last days are coming. What are they doing? They’re watching TV, wasting their time. But that’s because they’ve had no practice in looking at the mind, understanding the mind. When they look at their own minds, they’re all confused. So they look for distraction instead. But if you go with distraction, what are distractions? There’s sensual desire, there’s ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety and uncertainty—none of which are going to lead you to a good place. You want to make your mind focused and clear on its priorities at times like that. So when the time comes to go, you go well. As long as you have to stay, you stay well. Because whether you go or whether you stay, you’ve got the mind as a good place in which to inhabit, because you’ve come to know it well.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2021/210711_To_Go_Well.mp3>