A Dhamma Bucket List

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In English, we have a concept called a “bucket list.” It comes from a slang expression. When someone dies, we say that they kicked the bucket. And a bucket list is something you want to do before you kick the bucket. People sometimes make lists of places they want to go, pieces of art they want to see. Different kinds of food they want to eat. In general, the bucket list is a list of things you would want to experience, things you want to take in, in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. But when you think about it, say you do go to all those places on your bucket list, what do you have at the end? Do you have a memory? We know what happens to memories that get blurry. And do those memories help you? You approach the bucket and get ready to kick it. Are those memories going to help you at all? Often they’ll get in the way, because you remember what happens when you die. You latch on to craving. You realize you can’t stay in this body any longer. There’s a desire to keep on going, to keep on experiencing things in the senses. And that craving will take you to a new rebirth. The Buddhist image is of a fire. It’s burning one house, and then it clings to the wind and sets fire to another house. So memories, say, of having gone to a Buddhist holy spot or having gone to a particular mountain, a particular river, if you latch on to that, it won’t necessarily take you to a good place. If you do go to the Buddhist holy spots, you see people who were born there, who’ve lived their lives there. For the most part, now they’re not Buddhist. For them, it’s just a way to make money off of the tourists that come. In other places, other things that you can be doing just might keep pulling you back, pulling you back. The ideal bucket list is one that pulls you forward to a good place. In other words, instead of thinking of things you want to experience before you die, it’s better to think about things you want to accomplish, goodness you want to accomplish, that you want to leave behind in the world before you die. That’s a useful bucket list. So what qualities would you like to develop in the moment? The mind. Because those are the things that will help you. Just think about wind going from one house to another, carrying a fire with it. The wind is pretty blind. That wind is craving. We know how blind craving can be. You want to have some control over the cravings that come into the mind. And that control comes from developing good qualities in the mind. The Buddha has several lists. One is the things that lead you to a good destination. There are four qualities all together. One is conviction. Conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. Think about what that means. The Buddha gained his awakening through his own actions, by developing good qualities of the heart. Ardency, resolution, heedfulness. And he isn’t the only one who has those qualities. It’s simply that he had them developed. He worked at them. So those are some things you could work at. Develop your heedfulness. Each day, when the sun rises, you can remind yourself, “You could go today. Are you ready to go?” And part of the mind, of course, will say, “No.” Well, why not? What would pull you back? What would weigh you down if you suddenly found that you had to go? Well, learn to let go of that particular thing. Work on letting go of that thing through your meditation, through your contemplation. Resolution. Basically, you see something is really good and you stick with it. It’s very closely related to determination. You may make a vow that every day you want to meditate X number of hours. Read dhamma books. Make sure that you’re in touch with the dhamma every day. Ardency, of course, is being able to look at your mind. If something unskillful comes up in the mind, you try to get rid of it right away. The Buddha’s image is of a person with his hair on fire. Sensual desire comes up. Anger comes up. Greed comes up. Jealousy. Envy. You want to put these things out. Don’t let them stay around. Because if they get used to staying around, they begin to take over. And Chan Chah has a nice image. He says, “It’s as if your mind is a house with one seat, and whoever’s sitting in the seat is in charge.” So you want to make sure you’re in the seat. A thought comes up. Think about someone visiting the house with an idea. “Wouldn’t it be nice to go here?” “Wouldn’t it be nice to go there?” “Would you do this?” “Would you do that?” You have to stay in the seat and ask yourself, “Well, if I actually did that, where would I go?” Don’t let that person come in and take over the seat. You have to be in charge all the time. There will be things you do have to think about, but it’s good to have thought about them first before you jump into that particular thought and ride off. So that’s conviction. Notice with the Buddha that conviction doesn’t mean simply that you believe in something, but it means that you actually act on the belief. The belief is that it is possible to gain true happiness through your efforts. You don’t have to depend on anyone else. So every time a decision comes up in the mind to think about this or to do that or to say this, think of it as occurring in a world where the Buddha has gained awakening, where his teachings are still alive, and it is possible to practice those teachings. Always keep your decision in that world. Then you’ll have something good to take with you. At the same time, you’ll be leaving good things behind, a good example to others, a more peaceful environment around you. The second quality is virtue. You want to make sure that your actions are in line with the five precepts, because you don’t want the kind of karma that comes from having broken the precepts. There’s a certain pride, a certain sense of self-esteem. This is a healthy pride that goes with observing the precepts. It builds up a momentum, because that is one thing you have to watch out for as death approaches. Our thoughts are really beneath you. In this particular lifetime you wouldn’t dare do this or that, but here’s an opening in another lifetime where you could get away with things. A sensual desire appears. Something you’re angry about appears. If you have the self-esteem that says, “No, I’m better than that,” don’t let those thoughts pull you down. The third quality is generosity. Here you really are leaving good things behind in the world. As I said, the things you leave behind are really yours. The things you try to hold on to, those get torn away from your grasp as you die. But the things you’ve given away, the time you’ve given away, the energy you’ve given away, those things are yours. The image she has is of there being relatives who are already there on the other side and watching you, like relatives would. A loved relative who at last has come home. So as you go into that other world, it’s a good world to go to, a place where you have a home, and there are people to welcome you. Dave is to welcome you, ideally. And then finally, the last quality is discernment. What it calls is penetrating discernment into arising and passing away that leads to the right ending of stress and suffering. You don’t simply watch things come and go. As you meditate, you try to get a sense of which things are good things to come and which things are good things to go. That’s what’s meant by penetrative. And you begin to realize there are certain qualities in the mind that you can give rise to. They may not be there yet, but you can give rise to them. Or there may be qualities that are already there that are not so honorable, not so good. But you don’t have to hold on to them. You don’t have to say, “Well, this is just the way I am.” If the Buddha had said, “This is just the way I am,” he would have stayed in his palace. If all the greater jhans, when they were young, just said, “Well, this is just the way I am,” they would have stayed as farmers. They would have stayed with their greed, aversion, and delusion. And there’d be nothing special there to remember. But they took it upon themselves to say, “Well, there are better things I can give rise to, and these are these bad things I can let go of, and here’s my chance.” This is what’s really nice about the Dhamma. It doesn’t make itself available only to people who are wealthy or people who have lots of free time, people with a good education. It’s open to anybody. Anybody who has the desire to want to find happiness that’s harmless, happiness that’s secure, happiness that lifts you up to a higher level. And as you develop your discernment through mindfulness and concentration, you begin to realize that, yes, you can develop those good qualities. They’re open to you. So there you are—conviction, virtue, generosity, discernment. There’s another list that the Buddha associates with the qualities that lead you to be a deva. Because sometimes you look at the human world and say, “This is not a world I’d want to come back to.” But it is possible to practice the Dhamma on the deva level so that when extra quality is learning, reading the Dhamma, memorizing the Dhamma, and having good Dhamma phrases in mind. As you think about the moment of death, as you approach death, lots of different thoughts will be pulling you in lots of different directions, and it’s good to have some good Dhamma phrases in mind. “May all beings be happy.” “I’m the owner of my actions.” Thoughts that will remind you that you have choices to make. You have choices to make as death approaches, and you want to make good choices because they’ll make a big difference. All too many people feel that when death approaches, there’s nothing they can do. They just give up and go wherever their past karma may take them. In Thai, this is called yathagam. Whatever your past karma is, that’s how you go. You slide down. If you can remember the Dhamma, it teaches you occasionality. Even at the moment of death, there are great things you can do. Just because the body is wearing out doesn’t mean the mind has to give up. Think about the Buddha. He was a defiant person, an audacious person, thinking that a deathless could be found. But there are reports that he did. He did find it. So you want your mind to be audacious and dauntless. Even as aging comes, as illness comes, even as death comes. Because the reports about the Buddha suggest that it is possible for you, too, to find the deathless. That should be number one on your bucket list. But the way to get there is to focus on the causes. Conviction. Bridging. Virtue. Generosity. Discernment. And learning the Dhamma. Make that your bucket list. Then you’ll leave good things behind and you’ll take good things with you. And there will be good things to greet you on the other side.

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