

An Examined Life

September 3, 2005

We're all going to die someday. If you look around you, there's going to be a funeral for every single person in this room, and for the people sitting outside as well. We don't like to think about that, but still each of us knows that we're going to die, and one of the great ironies of life is that we pretend that we don't know. We live our lives completely oblivious to the fact that they're going to end someday, because most of us choose to push thoughts of death out of our mind. We feel there's nothing much you can do about it. It's so completely random, you have no idea when it's going to happen, and thinking about it is morbid and depressing, so let's just not think about it.

But it's a common fact that in order not to think about it, you have to stuff your mind full of all kinds of other thoughts. Many of us feel that the more thoughts we can stuff into the mind, the further we can keep thoughts of death at bay. So it becomes a habit, not only multitasking outside, but multitasking inside as well. There's a whole committee in there. Everybody's jabbering away for fear that there will be a moment of silence. That's one way of thinking about death.

The other way is to realize that there are things you *can* do to prepare. In other words, there are skillful and unskillful ways of living, skillful and unskillful ways of dying. I've seen this in my own life. I've seen two teachers of mine approach death, and I've also seen my father approach death. The people who'd been meditating approached death with a lot more mindfulness, a lot more alertness, and a lot less fear. They were much more in charge of the situation than those who hadn't meditated, because they'd learned to allow the mind to grow quiet and to be comfortable with the quietness of the mind. People like this don't keep running away from it, because they've realized that when the mind is quiet, it's not a vacuum. It's actually a lot more solid, a lot more secure than the mind that's filling itself up with thoughts.

So an important part of any well-examined life is taking some time off to look at your life, to ask yourself where you're going, and what it's going to accomplish. You pull out of the rat race for a while and come out to a place like this, and just sit quietly and look at your life, look at the life of the people around you. The Buddha compares this to getting up in a tower, looking down on the people below. You see them scurrying around, and despite all the scurrying and busyness, it doesn't really accomplish that much. At the same time, there's so much conflict and so much heartbreak. You wonder: Is it all worth it?

Some people will say, “Well, that’s all there is. So just immerse yourself in it.” But the Buddha said, “No, that’s not all. There is something more.” When the mind is trained it opens up to a real solidity inside, something really dependable, a true refuge inside that’s of real essence, something really solid. He compared it to the heartwood of a tree that doesn’t rot when the rest of the tree rots away. It’s the sort of thing that can stay totally untouched by aging, illness, and death.

So think about your life. You realize that you’ve got that choice. Are you going to spend all your time scurrying around or you are going to spend some time looking for this core, this solidity inside? Think about this a lot when you have trouble getting the mind to settle down in meditation. It doesn’t seem to want to stay with the breath, it’s filled with all kinds of other thinking. Tell yourself, as long as the mind is going to think, let’s think in this direction: What’s really worth thinking about? What’s not? What when you think about it will actually help lead to a good solid happiness, and what’s going to lead to happiness that just vanishes in your hand, like trying to catch hold of a mirage?

That, the Buddha says, is where real wisdom starts: when you decide that you want to work toward a happiness that lasts, something that’s solid and secure. When you think in these terms and then see thoughts popping up in the mind, you ask yourself: “If I followed those thoughts, where would they go? Where would they lead me?” This, the Buddha said, is the important first step in the practice: stepping out of your thoughts a little bit and looking at them, in terms not so much of their content but as part of a chain of cause and effect. Where are they going to go? Where do they lead? Some thoughts, he said, are skillful. They actually lead to happiness, long-term happiness. Others are unskillful. They might lead to a short-term happiness, but they turn into something else afterwards, and that something else is not happiness.

To keep yourself from getting pulled away by them, it’s good to have a physical anchor. That’s why we focus on the breath, focus on the body. If you simply use one thought to watch another thought, it’s very easy to get swept along with the current. But if you can have at least part of your awareness with the breath, that gives you an outside standpoint. That’s your tower for watching these thoughts. Even if you can’t keep all of your awareness or all your attention on the breath, at least have some of it with the breath. That helps keep you anchored in the present moment.

And be very honest with yourself about these thoughts. Where are they really going to go? Suppose you’re very successful in business, very successful in art, very successful in whatever career you choose: How far can that take you? The Buddha pointed out that the most important skills in life are the ones that deal precisely

with the issue of aging, illness, and death, yet so many of the skills we pick up from the world totally avoid those issues. But then we run slam up against them when they come, because they *are* going to come.

So when you apply a really level gaze to your thinking, after a while it becomes less and less and less attractive, less compelling, and the idea of being quiet, of being still so that you can really watch what's going on in the mind and gain some control over it: That gets more and more appealing.

This is called using discernment to foster concentration. Some people find it easy for the mind to settle down; other people don't. It's like different types of trees. If a tree is out the middle of the field, with no other trees are around, it's very easy to cut it down, because it's not entangled with anything else. But if the tree is in the forest and its branches are entangled with the branches of the other trees there, it takes a lot of work and thought to cut it down. You have to cut this branch, cut that branch, figure out which direction it can fall. In other words, you have to use your discernment to cut away a lot of the mind's attachments before it's even willing to settle down.

So try to think about these issues if you find the mind running rampant. As the chant just now said, *the world is swept away. It does not endure*. Everything is very, very impermanent. The passage comes from a sutta where an old king is asking a young monk, "Why did you ordain?" The young monk says that the first thing he reflected on was that the world is swept away. The king says, "What do you mean?" The monk asks him a question in return. "When you were young, were you strong?" The king says, "Yes, very strong. I saw no one who was my equal in strength." "How about now?" "No," the king says, "now I'm 80 years old. Sometimes I think to put my foot one place and it goes someplace else." You lose control over your body. As the body grows old, it doesn't ask your permission to grow old first.

The world offers no shelter: That's the next contemplation. The king says, "What do you mean, the world offers no shelter? I've got troops and I've got money to protect me from all kinds of things." So the monk asks him, "Do you have any recurring illness?" The king says, "Yes. Sometimes the illness gets so bad, everybody around me thinks I'm going to die." The monk asks him, "When you're that ill, and there's a lot of pain, can you ask your courtiers and all the other people who live under your control to share out the pain, so that you will feel less pain?" The king says, "No, I've got to feel it all myself." The monk says, "That's what that contemplation means: The world offers no shelter."

The world has nothing of its own: That's the third contemplation. The king says again, "I've got all these treasures, what do you mean, it has nothing of its own?"

And the monk says, “When you die, can you take all those treasures with you, or you have to leave them behind, to whoever is going to take them?” And the answer is obvious.

The fourth contemplation—*the world is insufficient, a slave to craving*: The king asks, “What does that mean?” And the monk says, “Do you now rule over this prosperous country?” The king says, “Yes.” “Suppose someone were to come and say there’s another country, also prosperous, off to the east, and with the forces you have, you could conquer it and enjoy its wealth as well. What would you do?” The king says, “I’d attack it and conquer it.” “And suppose someone were to come from the west,” the monk asks, “with the same news?” The king says, “I’d conquer that country, too.” Here he is, 80 years old, and he’s going to keep conquering countries. Messengers from the south, messengers from the north, even messengers from across the ocean come with news that there are other countries that are also prosperous, and the king would want to conquer them as well. In other words, you never have enough. You just keep asking for more.

A *New Yorker* cartoon once showed a group of businessmen sitting around, and one says, “When I realized I had plenty, then I realized that there was plenty more.” The human mind never has a sense of enough. It’s never satisfied. As long as you’re looking for happiness outside, it’s never fulfilling. Do you want your life to be driven by that? Or would you like to train the mind so that it’s not afraid of stillness, not afraid of quiet, not driven by these crazy desires?

When you think in these ways, it leads to a sense of dismay. You realize how much effort you put into life that doesn’t really accomplish anything. This gives you a sense of dispassion, but it should also lead to a sense of conviction, that there is a way out by training the mind. Whenever a thought comes up, you can ask yourself, “Where are you going? Anyplace that’s really worth going or some place that’s not?” If it’s not, just drop the thought. It’ll wander around for a while trying to attract your attention, but you don’t have to snuff it out. Just leave it alone. It’ll disappear.

Other thoughts will come up. This will take a while. But if you apply the same perspective to all of them, after a while they get weaker and weaker, and it’s easier and easier for the mind to finally really settle down and feel at home in the present moment, with a sense of ease and well-being, by cutting off paths leading outside. The Buddha doesn’t leave you totally adrift or starve you. He says there is actually a lot of potential wealth right here in the present moment, there are a lot of resources that can be developed into true happiness. But the mind that’s not used to looking here has to be gradually trained in this direction before it’s willing to settle down. But it *can* be trained. Just be persistent. Try to maintain this

perspective. Think of yourself up in the tower, looking down at the world, looking at your life. “Where is it coming from, where is it going? What do I want to do with this opportunity?”

When you keep thinking in that way, it brings the mind to the point where it’s willing to settle down and give the present moment a chance.