

An Admirable Friend — In Memory of Luang Loong

March 26, 2010

Bring your 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. Underlying all this is the 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. It needs to be trained so that its actions yield the happiness you want, a happiness that doesn't harm you, doesn't harm anybody else. You also have the conviction that these qualities we're developing in 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.

Then, from the point of the view of a trained mind, you can look at other issues in life—aging, illness, and death—with a lot less fear, a lot less trepidation, realizing that the reason we suffer from these things is because our minds are untrained. But the suffering is optional. There is pain in illness, there is pain in aging, there is 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 is the third night of chanting for Luang Loong, who passed away three days ago. And it's good to reflect—because remember, meditation is not just awareness in the present moment. There has to be an element of reflection, too. As the Buddha taught mindfulness, it's not just bare awareness. It's full presence of mind, keeping things in mind. He compared mindfulness to 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 have mindfulness as your gatekeeper, you develop skillful qualities, and you let go of unskillful ones.

So for mindfulness to perform these functions, there has to be more than just bare awareness or receptivity or nonreactive awareness. You have to keep certain things in mind, certain standards. Have a basic frame of reference and then 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 powers of judgment, judging what's right, what's wrong, what's skillful,

what's not, what's beneficial, and 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, we have to stop and think—if we haven't been thinking already. Actually, the Buddha tells you to reflect on death every day. When someone you know well passes away, it brings the reflection even closer to the home. You realize that death is not an impersonal thing. It strikes persons and makes you reflect on their lives.

In Luang Loong's case, there are a lot of good things to reflect on. He was 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 who knew him gave him a solid gold Buddha image, about three inches across the base. They had found it while digging around some old ruins, which back in those days was pretty commonplace. He looked at it and realized that it wasn't the sort of thing that he should keep. Something like this should go to the King. So he told himself that someday he would be able to meet the King and he would give the King the image. So he wrapped it up in tissue paper, so that it wouldn't look like anything of value, stuck in his shoulder bag, and carried it around.

Some time later, he actually did have the opportunity. It was up in the mountains of northern Thailand, where the King had an opium-crop-replacement project going. Luang Loong was visiting there with some lay people and it so happened that the King came in a helicopter.

So Luang Loong left the group he was with and went over and sat alone under a tree. The King saw him and came over and bowed down. Luang Loong handed him the image. The king unwrapped the tissue and said, "This is gold." Luang Loong said, "I know." So the King pulled out his notebook and jotted down the details of where it was found.

He had some retainers who were following him. The custom is in Thailand that a lot of people do like to give things to the King, and the King's retainers then take those things from the King so that he doesn't have to carry them around. So someone was standing behind the King with his hand outstretched, waiting to be handed the image, but King didn't give it to him. He stuck it in his own pocket.

This is very typical of Luang Loong: He would get good things, but he would 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 in the last months of his life was really concerned about this. People would give donations for Luang Loong's illness to help with the cost of the medicine, or whatever costs he ran up, and Luang Loong would use the money to give gifts, basically to give away. The monk had to actually hide from Luang Loong

the amount of money that was in his account, where he kept a separate account. Now, of course, the money he had kept wouldn't do him any good.

You see the wisdom of generosity. As Ajaan 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, the goodness of heart: That's the coconut milk.

So it's good to think about this to keep our priorities straight. Even if you're not ready yet for the 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 could 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 heart and mind. This is what *bhavana* means: to develop. So you reflect on the lives of good people who have gone before, that this is how wise people behave. They learn to let go of the things they have to leave behind, and squeeze the coconut milk out of them.

So here it 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. Learn to 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, while you're doing this, 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 nowhere. It's because they've shown us good examples—how to behave, how to think, 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. We try to repay the people who have gone before, and also emulate them in our actions.

So tonight at the end of meditation, dedicate the merit to Luang Loong, because without people like him, where would we be? The best way to carry on their influence is to embody it in our thoughts, our words, and our deeds—so that 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 making sure it gets delivered into the future by focusing on the present right now.