

Step by Step

December 5, 2018

We're sitting here meditating, we're practicing the Dhamma, partly because of the example of those who've gone before us, or as the Buddha would say, entirely because of the example of those who've gone before us. There's a famous exchange where Ven. Ananda comes and says, "This is half of the holy life: having admirable friends." And the Buddha says, "No, it's the entirety." He goes on to say that if it weren't for him as an admirable friend, where would we be? We wouldn't be practicing. We'd be off someplace else. We wouldn't have any idea that there would be something good to be found just sitting here watching our breaths. So it's good to think of the good examples that have gone before us, from the Buddha all the way on down.

Tonight we're commemorating the birthday of Rama IX. It's become Thai national day. The reason we're commemorating him is because of the good examples he set, primarily in the area of generosity, persistence, and truthfulness. We look back on the history of the world, and there are very few people that really stand out for their goodness, but those who do, stand out because of these qualities. They're generous with other human beings. They set their sights on something that's really good. They stick with it. They develop endurance, because they have to meet up with a lot of obstacles.

It comes down to determination. This ideal can inspire us, because it can apply to us as well. We're not in a position where we can be kings of countries or queens, but we *are* in a position where we lead a human life. We've gone to all this effort to develop the goodness to become human beings. What are we going to do with it? Are we just going to eat, have pleasures and pains, and then die? Think about the Buddha's recollection of his previous lives. That was pretty much what he remembered of every life: what he ate, what kind of pleasures he had, what pains he felt, how he died, and then how he was reborn again. That's usually all there is. It's a pretty depressing chronicle. You have to ask yourself, is this the kind of life you want? Eating, pleasures, pains, die? Or do you want to leave something behind? Or rather, do you want to take something good with you as you leave something good behind?

This is where determination comes in. You decide that there's something you really want to devote your life to. You want to make an extra effort that's going to require that you be truthful, that you give up some things, that you be wise in choosing a good goal and wise in trying to follow it, and then keeping your mind

calm as you do this. So think about what you want out of your lives—this life and lives to come—and see if you can follow through.

Meditation is a good test for that. We're sitting here secluded from sensuality, as the Buddha said. For most of us, that's where our main pleasures in life come—our fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures: the pleasures we're going to have tomorrow, the kind of food we're going to eat, the places we're going to go, the pleasures we're going to enjoy with other people. We're saying No to that for the time being. We want something higher. We want something better, so we seclude ourselves from that. We seclude ourselves from all unskillful qualities. There's a fair amount of giving up that goes into that. We make up our minds to stay with one thing. We're going to stay with the breath, with "buddho," or with a combination of the two. Then we have to be true to that determination, true to that desire. So you stick with it.

This requires mindfulness, the ability to remember, so you don't forget suddenly. There are lots of different voices in the mind, lots of different attitudes in the mind that would be all too happy to have you forget, because they have other agendas. So you have to stay right here. Pains may come up in the body, you're going to stay right here. You may get tired or sleepy, you're going to stay right here. Distractions come in, you're going to stay right here. You don't let them waylay you. This is how you develop something good in the mind, and it's a mind like this—a mind that's been trained—that can do something good out in society.

As we all know, the good that's done in the society may last or it may not last. Just as there are many voices in your mind, there are many forces out in society that would be all too happy to erase whatever good you do. This is where it's important to realize that, at the very least, you're developing good qualities in the mind, and you can take those with you. As for whether you'll be remembered for the good you've done by lots of people or only a few people, *you'll* know that you've done good, and that's what counts. So it's good to think every now and then: Where is your life going? Where would you like it to go?

There's a tradition in Thailand that there are two kinds of merit-making ceremonies: those that are auspicious and those that are not auspicious. The ones that are not auspicious have to do with death, but that's a Brahmanical concept. It's not a Buddhist concept. As the Buddha said, when you think about the death of someone who has died before you and the fact that you're going to die someday, the question comes up, "What am I going to do with the time I have left?" If you're wise, you're going to be heedful. You're going to make good use of what time you have. How much time do you have? Well, you know you have this

much time—right here, right now—so you make use of this. In this sense, when we make merit for people who have passed away, it's not inauspicious.

Heedfulness is very auspicious. It's one of the activities listed in the Mangala Sutta, which is a list of ways that you protect yourself and ways you give yourself blessings.

The Buddha himself, when he talks about being in the present moment, it's not because it's a nice place to be, but because it's the place where you can do your work—and there's a lot of work to be done in the mind. He says to look into your mind. If you see anything that's going to be troublesome if you had to die tonight, do your best to get rid of it right now.

So, even though we take the long view that we'd like to use our lives for a good purpose, it ultimately comes back down to what you're doing right here, right now: this step and then the next step and then the next step. As with any journey, you take it one step at a time. You make sure you're headed in the right direction, but then you focus on where you're placing your feet. Make sure that you place them well, and keep heading in the right direction. That's the important thing. Even if death happens to come before you've reached the goal, at least you're heading in the right direction, and that'll give you a good chance the next time around.

As for whatever obstacles may come up in the meantime, learn to deal with them skillfully, because the paradox here, of course, is that we have to be heedful and we have to focus on getting as much accomplished as we can in the present moment, but we also have to be patient. If you try to push things too fast, you can ruin them. The image they give in the Canon is of a couple. There's an old brahman who has a young wife, and she gets pregnant. He decides he's going to get a monkey for the baby, but before they get the monkey they say, "Well, let's dye the monkey blue if it's a boy, pink if it's a girl." Even back in those days, blue was for boys, pink was for girls. The question then was, what's the gender of the child? The wife takes a knife and opens up her womb to see. Of course, that kills the kid.

You can't let your impatience get in the way of doing it right. So when you have a large goal for your life, break it down into small steps, and make sure that you get each step right. It's like meditating for an hour. You're not going to focus on the whole hour all at once. You focus on the hour one breath at a time. Try to do each breath as well as you can. In other words, make it as comfortable as possible for the body and make sure that your mind is as fully alert as possible to what's going on—what you're doing, the results you're getting. And as you take care of each step, that takes care of the whole hour.

In the same way, each step in your quest for whatever your goal may be—if it's a good goal, if it's a skillful goal—each step is what's going to guarantee that the goal is going to happen, is going to be attained. Don't focus so much attention on the goal that you misstep. Dogen the Zen master has a nice image. He says that, in walking the path, the realization of the cessation of suffering is the same thing as the development of the path. Now, this doesn't mean that the path is the goal. What it does mean, though, is that in the doing of the path, you're going to realize the cessation of suffering. You don't have to keep glancing down at the end of the road saying, "When is it going to come? When is it going to come?" When you're glancing down at the end of the road, you're not looking carefully at what you're doing. So look carefully at what you're doing. That's where you're going to see what you want to find.