

## *Days Fly Past*

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“Days and nights fly past, fly past: What am I doing right now?” The Buddha has you reflect on that every day. The first sentence is for reflecting on how fleeting time is. Our lives are rushing—where? Rushing toward death, that’s for sure. When are we going to come slamming into death? We don’t know. So we don’t know how much time we have left, which comes to the second part of the reflection: “What am I doing right now?” You at least know that you have the present moment. What are you going to do with it? For the Buddha, that’s always the big question. What are you doing with what you’ve got right now? His teaching focuses on doing, on action. Everything we know is an action or the result of an action. Even theories are actions. Ideas are actions. Concepts are actions. They’re part of a casual chain. Where are they taking us?

Even when you’re meditating, sitting here trying to do absolutely nothing, there’s still an action going on. There’s an intention. So what is your intention right now? Focus on the breath, get the mind to settle down. And in the process of settling down, learn to see what’s going on, to see more and more clearly what you are doing. The whole point of the practice is to get clearer on what it is to act. What does it mean to do something? What does it mean to have an intention? And in particular, which actions and which intentions are most skillful. Which words, which thoughts, which deeds are most skillful? Always look at things in those terms.

When I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, and I’d report a particular experience in my meditation, he’d never say, “This is the first jhana,” “This is the second jhana,” this is whatever. He wouldn’t tell you what it was, but he would tell you what to do with the experience. First off, though, he’d want to hear about experiences that had happened repeatedly. In fact ones that you were continuing to have right while you were talking to him: Those were the best. If you could get into a particular stage of concentration, he wanted you to try to maintain it, to bring it to him basically. And then he would tell you what to do with it. That was the important thing: what to do with it.

Ajaan Phut, in one of his Dhamma talks, described his time studying with Ajaan Sao. When people came to study meditation with Ajaan Sao, he’d teach them *buddho* as the object of meditation. If they wanted to know what it meant, he would say, “Don’t ask. Just go ahead and do it.” If they wanted to know what was going to happen if they meditated on Buddha, he’d say, “Don’t ask. Just do it and see what happens.” And so if they actually meditated and came back to report on what was happening, they’d want to know, “Is this right?” and he’d tell them whether it was right or wrong, and then say,

“This is what you should do with it next.”

That’s the attitude we should try to develop in our meditation: Whatever comes up in the meditation, always ask the question: What am I going to do with it? When you see visions, when you see light, what are you going to do with them? That’s the important issue. If you place too many layers of interpretation on what you see—“Is the vision true? What does it mean?”—you get further and further away from the whole point of the practice, which is to be clear on what you are doing. Oftentimes when an insight comes, the important thing is what happens in the mind right after the insight arises. If there’s a sense of pride—“Hey I’ve had this insight! I’ve learned this understanding!”—you’ve short circuited the process. The insight, if it’s genuine insight, is supposed to help cut through some defilements, but what we tend to do with it is pile a few more on. So whatever comes up in the practice, ask yourself: “What should I do with this? What is the most skillful way of approaching this so that I can learn some good Dharma lessons?” And then you let it go.

As for what you did in the past, you don’t want to carry that around as a burden, but in case there are things in the past that are burdensome to the mind, the best way to deal with them is to try to develop as much goodwill, compassion, appreciation, equanimity as you can in the present moment. Try to make these qualities as limitless as possible. There are many passages in the canon where the Buddha said that these are precisely the qualities of mind that help mitigate memories of past mistakes, and they help mitigate the karmic force of past mistakes as well. You can’t totally erase those karmic forces, but you can mitigate them. If you couldn’t mitigate them, there would be no way anyone could get out of the cycle. It would just be one endless stream of retribution because we’ve all got bad things we’ve done in the past.

But again, when memory of that sort of thing comes up in the mind, the question is: What are you going to do with it? The Buddha doesn’t advise remorse. He advises developing the proper attitude: One, being determined not to repeat the mistake, and then two, trying to develop as much limitless goodwill as you can for all beings. Of all the activities that are said to be meritorious—giving, virtue, and the development of goodwill—goodwill is the most special. Giving and virtue provide their benefits right now and on into the future. But only the development of goodwill can work retroactively, tempering the results of bad actions in the past. The image the Buddha gives is of enormous river, like the river Ganges. You can put a hunk of salt crystal in the river Ganges and still drink the water. It isn’t too salty because there’s so much water compared to the salt. But if you were to put that same hunk of salt into a glass of water, you couldn’t drink it because the amount of water is so small. In the same way, when you develop an attitude of goodwill without limit for all beings, it helps mitigate

the impact of past actions. So there *is* something you can do in the present moment to mitigate past actions. You can't totally erase them, but you can mitigate their impact. So if that's what's coming up in the mind, memories of past mistakes, develop goodwill. Instead of asking, "What did I do in the past? Why did I do it?" it's more fruitful to ask, "What am I doing about these memories of the past as they're appearing in the present?" That actually gets you somewhere.

If anticipations of the future are coming up in the mind, reflect on death, because you don't know when or how it's going to happen. You have to be prepared for that eventuality as well. Someone once said that wisdom starts with the reflection on death, realizing that you don't have all the time in the world. You can't just do anything you want to. You've got to figure out what you are going to do with the small amount of time remaining to you. What is the best use of your life? And again, that boils down to: What are you doing right now? If you're putting the mind in shape so that death won't shake it, you're doing the right thing with right now.

Why does death shake the mind? Because we identify with the body, we identify with feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, sensory consciousness. As long as we identify with things, we're going to be shaken not only by death, but even by the slightest changes in these things. Life seems to be going along well and all of a sudden something comes up unexpectedly. We're rocked by it. So the path of practice that allows us to let go of these things, to stop identifying with them: That's the path of practice that's the best use of our time right now.

There's a passage in the Canon where a group of monks are going to a strange land. So they go to say good-bye to Sariputta, and he asks them, "Suppose someone asks you: 'What does your teacher teach?' What are you going to say?" Apparently they hadn't given much thought to this, so they said, "Well, what would *you* say?" And Sariputta said, "Our teacher teaches the abandonment of the attachment to the five khandhas. And the next question would be, "What advantage do you see in that?" And the answer: "Because when the five khandas change, the mind isn't shaken by them." That's Sariputta's synopsis of what the whole teaching is all about: how to keep the mind from being shaken. And this is what we're working toward, what they call the unshakeable release of the mind. To get there involves virtue, concentration, discernment: *heightened* virtue, *heightened* mind, *heightened* discernment. With heightened virtue, you really are meticulous about your precepts, you really are meticulous about your actions. The heightened mind is the development of strong concentration. Heightened discernment is the discernment that sees through our attachments. These are all activities, things we can do.

And then there's release, which is the fourth of what they call the noble dhammas.

That's not something you do. It's the result. It's where all the other ones are headed, it's where they're aimed. This practice is what they call the karma that leads to the end of karma. You have to actively do this, you have to actively train the mind in this direction. It's not simply a matter of going back to what might be assumed to be its original nature. There is always the question: Even if it had an original nature that you could talk about, what would be the purpose of that, because the original nature got defiled. If you simply go back to the original nature, it's just going to get defiled all over again. You want something that can't be defiled, that can't be trapped. What this means is that we have to train the mind in a new direction. Bring it to a new point of equilibrium, where it hasn't been before. That's the doing. Once it gets there, then there's the non-doing, the release from intention, the release from karma.

So this is where all of our actions should aim. Even before you get to that unshakeable release, if your actions are aimed in this direction, then death doesn't hold the fear that it normally would—because you've built up a momentum. And you'll reach a point in your practice where you know that death is not the end. You may not have come to the end of your defilements at that point, but you know that death is not the end, that there's a deathless. And the momentum of your actions toward the direction of the deathless will just keep carrying over as long as you maintain the determination that this is where you want your actions to aim. This is why the Buddha has us be very careful about what we do and say and think at all times.

You can't act simply on impulse or just because you feel like doing something. You always have to take into consideration what the results of your actions are going to be. This may seem tiring or wearisome, but that's why we have concentration practice, to give the mind a place to rest. At the very least, it is not doing anything unskillful while it's resting, and it's also building up the qualities it's going to need to keep itself strong in this examination of its actions. Ajaan Lee makes a comparison with a knife. If you have a knife that you just keep using, using, using, without sharpening it, without coating it with oil, it's going to get dull, it'll probably get rusty. Then when you try to use it to cut something, it takes a lot of effort. If you're cutting food, many times the rust will contaminate what you've tried to cut. If you eat it, you may catch tetanus and die. But if you keep the knife in the scabbard, keep it sharpened, bathe it in oil when it needs to be oiled, then when you pull it out and use it to cut things, they cut through nice and clean, they're not contaminated, and then you just put it back. That's the mind that has a good place of concentration as its resting point, its whetstone. In this way, the constant emphasis on looking at what you're doing becomes less and less onerous, less and less of a burden, because you've got a stronger mind. And you've got a good place to keep it when it doesn't have to be actively thinking about things, so that it's not

wasting its energy on frivolous matters. When the time comes when you have to decide what you want to say, what you want to do, you don't feel burdened by the events around you. And you can be very clear about what the consequences of your actions are going to be. This way you find you have less and less to regret in your life.

So, days and nights fly past, fly past, what are you doing right now? If the Buddha asks you this, what kind of answer would you give? If you can say, "I'm very carefully watching what I'm doing, saying, and thinking," that's a good answer. It shows that you're heedful. Remember the Buddha's last words: to achieve completion through heedfulness. This is sometimes translated as being diligent or being untiring, or being earnest, but that misses the point. The point is that you've got this power of action, and it's a potential both for great happiness and for great suffering, so you have to be very, very careful.

Someone today raised the question of whether Buddhism is life affirming or not, or world affirming or not. That's not the issue. For the Buddha the issue is to be action-affirming. Unlike some teachers who say that everything is pre-determined, he affirms the power of your actions. And that's a double-edged sword. So you have to be careful about what you do. You have to test your comprehension of the Dharma through your actions. And you have to learn how to manage your mind so that the kind of vigilance the Buddha recommends is not a burden.

This is why the path basically comes down to three things, virtue, concentration, discernment. Virtue is what keeps you from doing blatant things that are going to be harmful. Concentration is what gives you the strength you need in order to look deeper into the attachments of the mind that cause you to do very subtle harm, so that you can discern how to turn them around. You can develop the powers of your mind so that they can lead to the ultimate happiness. That is what it's all about: total release, total liberation. As the Buddha said, this is the karma that leads to the end of karma, the point where the mind is totally free.

What is that freedom like? He doesn't describe it. Some people think of nirvana as a place, but he is very clear that there is no place there. He said nirvana is reached from unestablished consciousness, a consciousness that doesn't plant itself in anything at all, neither here, nor there, nor in between. But before you get there, make sure your consciousness is very firmly planted here in the present moment. Because it's around here in the present moment that you're going to find this spot that has no place, no location. It's here. The Buddha gives you the tools to find it, and he tells you that there is something really valuable here. He doesn't describe it in too much detail, partly because it can't be described, partly because the description would just get in the way. He gives you just enough to know the standards you need for judging whether you've

found it or not. Is it constant? Is it totally free of stress? Is there any sense of attachment to “me” or “mine” in there? If it’s inconstant, if it’s stressful, if there’s any attachment to “me” or “mine” in there, it can’t be what you’re looking for. Keep on looking. But it is here. That’s the guarantee.

So days and nights fly past, fly past, what are you doing right now? Try to keep coming up with better and better answers for this question, not in terms of the words you would use to answer the Buddha, but just simply by being very careful about what you do. Because it all comes down to your actions. That’s what the teaching is all about.