Reflections on Death and Dying

Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya
(P. A. Payutto)

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by Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya (P. A. Payutto)
translated by Robin Moore

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Anumodanā

Several years ago, at the beginning of 2018, Mr. Robin Moore informed me of his wish to translate various Dhamma teachings on the subject of death and to give the completed book to his mother who had specifically asked about this subject. I express my appreciation for this wholesome and committed endeavour. Robin Moore compiled several teachings that I recommended, in addition to choosing some that he had found on his own.

Now, three and half years later, Robin has informed me that this book has finally reached completion. It contains ten separate talks as well as a concluding section of Buddhist proverbs on the theme of death. The book is titled 'Reflections on Death and Dying' and is now ready for publication.

This book has been a labour of love arising from a spirit of gratitude. I believe that it will be of benefit to many people, guiding them to a life of diligence and virtue. I applaud Robin's wholesome efforts and trust that his mother will delight in the fruits of this labour dedicated to her long-lasting wellbeing and happiness.

I also express my appreciation to Khun Peeranuch Kiatsommart, whose immense faith and generosity, and sustained patronage, has resulted in the publication and distribution of numerous Dhamma books in English. Her eminent good deeds have promoted the widespread study, practice, and realization of the Buddha's teachings and the prosperity of the path of truth long into the future.

Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya (Payutto)

24 July 2021

อนุโมทนา

นานมาแล้ว เมื่อแรกขึ้นปีใหม่ พ.ศ. ๒๕๖๑ คุณโรบิน มัวร์ (Robin Moore) ได้เขียนเล่าบอกความตั้งใจว่า ปรารถนาจะแปลคำสอนธรรมเกี่ยวกับความตาย เพื่อทำเป็นหนังสือที่จะมอบให้แก่คุณแม่ เป็นเครื่องสนองพระคุณของท่าน ตามที่ท่านได้เคยปรารภถามถึงหนังสือเกี่ยวกับเรื่องนี้ อาตมาอนุโมทนาความตั้งใจอันเป็นกุศลนั้น คุณโรบิน มัวร์ รวบรวมเรื่องที่อาตมาบอกไป และเรื่องที่พบเอง ได้จำนวนหนึ่ง แล้วก็แปลเรื่อยมา เป็นงานผูกพันใจ เคียงข้างงานทั้งหลายที่ผูกพันชีวิต

เวลาผ่านมาสามปีครึ่งเศษ บัดนี้ คุณโรบิน มัวร์ แจ้งว่า งานแปลที่ตั้งใจทำเพื่อสนองพระคุณของคุณแม่ ได้สำเร็จเสร็จสิ้นแล้ว รวมมี ๑๐ เรื่อง พร้อมทั้งพุทธาทิภาษิตเกี่ยวกับความตาย พร้อมจะพิมพ์เป็นเล่มหนังสือ ตั้งชื่อว่า *Reflections on Death and Dying*

งานแปลเล่มนี้ เกิดขึ้นจากน้ำใจที่เป็นบุญ โดยคุณธรรมแห่งความกตัญญู และหวังได้ว่าจะอำนวยประโยชน์แก่คนจำนวนมาก ที่จะนำให้มีชีวิตที่ดีงาม มีความไม่ประมาท ที่ชื่อว่าเป็นอมตบท จึงขออนุโมทนาคุณโรบิน มัวร์ ที่ได้ทำให้หนังสือนี้เกิดมีขึ้น และหวังว่าคุณแม่ของคุณโรบิน มัวร์ จะได้อนุโมทนาผลงานแห่งกตัญญูกตเวทิตานี้ เพื่อประโยชน์สุขที่ยั่งยืนนาน

พร้อมกันนี้ ขออนุโมทนา คุณพีรนุช เกียรติสมมารถ ที่มีศรัทธาประกอบด้วยจาคธรรมอย่างสูง ได้ส่งเสริมการแปล และจัดพิมพ์เผยแพร่หนังสือธรรมเป็นภาษาอังกฤษ โดยรับภาระในการอุปถัมภ์ทุนรอนทั้งหมดอันมากมาย นับว่าได้บำเพ็ญบุญกิริยาสำคัญ อันจะช่วยนำให้การศึกษา-สั่งสอน-เผยแผ่ธรรม และการรู้ธรรม-ปฏิบัติธรรม เจริญงอกงามแพร่หลาย นำมาซึ่งความไพบูลย์แห่งพระสัทธรรม ตลอดกาลสืบไป

สมเด็จพระพุทธโฆษาจารย์ (ปยุตฺโต)

๒๔ กรกฎาคม ๒๕๖๔

Foreword

Several years ago, before her 80th birthday, my mother asked whether I could recommend any Buddhist teachings on the subject of death and dying. I had recently given her a copy of *Buddhadhamma: The Laws of Nature and Their Benefits to Life.* Although this book contains numerous references to skilful reflections and meditations on death, on the whole they are rather technical and are not covered under a single heading.

Inspired by my mother's sincere inquiry, I asked permission from Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya (P. A. Payutto) to translate various talks he had given on this subject. I also asked him whether he could suggest any relevant texts published in Thai. The fruit of this endeavour is the book you now hold in your hands – a collection of ten separate talks as well as a concluding section of Buddhist proverbs.

I dedicate this book to my mother, Mrs. Karin Gunnemann, who has always shown great curiosity and open-mindedness. It is my conviction that many of the themes contained in this book will resonate with her, and that she will recognize how she has cultivated many of the wholesome qualities mentioned within. I hope that this recognition will enhance her present joy and help to dispel any lingering worries she may have when pondering the future.

In my experience it is rare to find someone who is truly interested in discussing the subject of death. And yet, along with coming of age ceremonies, formal admission into a religious tradition, marriage, among others, what other rite of passage is more significant than the act of dying?

Ignorance, often compounded by a deliberate refusal to examine aspects of reality, can fairly be identified as a primary cause for heedlessness. In this context, the Buddha declared: 'Heedfulness is the path to the deathless, heedlessness is the path to death.' A modern rendition of this principle is: 'Just because someone breathes, doesn't mean they are alive – it just means don't bury them yet!'

In contrast, the Buddha also stated: 'Mindfulness of death, when developed and cultivated, is of great fruit and benefit, culminating in the deathless, having the deathless as its consummation.'

I share any merit and goodness accrued by completing this translation with my mother. If by way of this dedication I have been able to repay some of the debt I owe her for years of unstinting care and support, then I too experience delight.

Robin Moore
Green Park Home

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1. Wisdom and Integrity in the Face of Truth[1]

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Homage to the Blessed, Noble, and Perfectly Enlightened One

Traditional Forms of Merit-Making

Most merit-making ceremonies, including today's memorial service, conform to Buddhist traditions passed down over generations. Such memorial services convey the goodness of both parties: the departed on the one hand and those who remain amongst the living and who sponsor such events on the other.

In terms of the departed, performing such ceremonies is a way of honouring their merits and kind deeds. Thus the name 'memorial'. Relatives and friends participating in these events dedicate any goodness accrued to the departed, wishing for their happiness and wellbeing in the next life. According to Buddhist customs and beliefs, it is possible for the deceased to receive the fruits of such acts of dedication.

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[1] Trans: an excerpt from the book เมื่อธรรมดามาถึง รู้ให้ทันและทำให้ถูก. The material in this book is selected from a Dhamma talk titled *Dhammatā Kathā*, presented by Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya (P. A. Payutto) at the 50th-day merit-making ceremony in honour of Khun Suphan Hemachayat at Wat Thong Nopakhun on 27 May 1984. At that time the venerable author's ecclesiastical title was Phra Rajavaramuni.

In terms of the sponsors, these ceremonies are also an opportunity to show personal qualities, in particular gratitude and appreciation. When individuals who have performed kinds acts have passed away, friends and relatives should not remain idle. They should fulfil their responsibilities by organizing commemorative services and thinking of ways to repay the favours bestowed on them in the past. As the death of loved ones limits the ways in which such repayment can be accomplished, we choose to engage in these wholesome acts of dedication.

Merit-Making as a Way to Cultivate Goodness

These memorials services are not merely a means to honour the relationship between the sponsors and the departed. The reason why Buddhists, from ancient times to the present, perform these ceremonies is also to provide an opportunity for people to do good deeds and to grow in wholesome states of mind. The essential purpose of these ceremonies is to develop virtue, thus benefiting everyone involved. In this way, family and friends do good deeds together and increase their wellspring of goodness.

Death Is Undesirable

In Buddhism, every opportunity to develop goodness is encouraged. Regardless of whether a situation is desirable or undesirable, we should try to derive some benefit from it. Death is normally considered something undesirable and disagreeable – it is a separation from what is cherished.[2] In

the domain of spiritual practice, however, although we may be faced with disagreeable situations giving rise to suffering or grief, we are urged to use them to bring about benefit and value, both for ourselves and others. Personally, we are able to perform wholesome deeds and to foster generosity, moral conduct, and mental cultivation.[3] Outwardly, by organizing such memorial services, we are able to support Buddhism as a whole and to provide participants with an opportunity to perform meritorious deeds, engage in spiritual development, and train in awareness. This very Dhamma talk is an example of using this occasion to generate blessings.

Death Is a Natural Part of Life

The statement that death is undesirable accords with the way most people feel about it. People generally measure and value things by using the benchmark of their own likes and dislikes. Death is disagreeable; we generally don't like it. This lies in contrast to those things we like, things we wish to generate or to increase.

According to the reasoned and systematic outline of the Buddha's teaching, however, death is classified as part of the natural order: it is a natural phenomenon, a normal occurrence. If there is birth there must be death; everything that is born must die. In other words, death only exists because it was preceded by birth. Birth and death are intimately entwined. We are not free to choose only one of these realities. Moreover, birth and death follow a causal process; they occur as a result

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[2] Death is a 'disagreeable condition' (*aniṭṭhārammaṇa*).
[3] *Dāna*, *sīla*, and *bhāvanā*, respectively.

of causes and conditions. With origination there is dissolution. Everything in the world begins with birth and ends with death.

Despite this truth, people still follow their preferences and desires; they want to exclusively align themselves with birth. Birth is a favoured topic of conversation accompanied by excitement and delight. The topic of death, on the other hand, is avoided or shunned. Some people do not even want to think about it! This contradicts the natural order – the Dhamma[4] – outlined by the Buddha.

Death Is a Reminder

In the Buddha's teachings, birth – so cherished by most people – is relatively overlooked. Death, on the other hand, is a much more frequent topic of discussion, one which is used as a reminder and spur for people to apply wise reflection. And even when birth is mentioned, its link with death is clearly drawn, and so it, too, can be used as a reminder. The teachings state that if one fears death, one should also fear birth. This is because birth necessarily precedes death. If you do not want to die, give up hankering after birth.

These teachings are used as recollections, urging people to live their lives uprightly and correctly. When people respond to birth with delight, they often fall into heedlessness. Instead of making haste in developing virtue and doing good, they often get lost in exuberance, merely seeking personal pleasure and gratification. They shun any reflections on death, because death makes them feel depressed and disheartened.

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[4] Trans.: Sanskrit: Dharma.

In the context of Dhamma practice, this is considered an unfortunate and mistaken way to live. The teachings emphasize repeated recollection of death. Such instruction goes against the grain of people's proclivities and habits. Yet the aim of the teachings is for the ultimate welfare of all people. They encourage us to face and accept the truth. And they point out skilful ways of conduct and practice. They are not merely abstract recollections on death; they are accompanied by practical means of living with the reality of death.

Suitable Response Towards Death

How is it that most people reflect on death incorrectly? Ordinary people's thoughts on death (and the deceased) are often fraught by feelings of fear, trepidation, and despair. A more subtle examination reveals that their thoughts are shaped by the particular relationship they had with the deceased. If they reflect on someone whom they resented or despised, say an enemy, they may experience satisfaction and joy. If the deceased was a stranger, they might feel indifference.[5]

Moreover, when they contemplate the general subject of death itself, they frequently experience dread and despondency. To sum up, when faced with death, the majority of people cannot establish their minds securely in wholesome states; instead, their minds tend to veer off from a straight path. Even when not confronted by the death of others, simply bringing up the thought of their own mortality may already generate anxiety and depression.

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[5] Trans.: likewise, if the deceased was a loved one, they usually experience grief and sorrow.

Recollection on Death Leads to Vigilance

How does Buddhism provide alternative teachings and guidance on how to properly relate to death? Buddhism teaches to frequently recollect death as a reminder of truth and an incentive to do good. One reflects on how death is a natural part of life. It is inescapable; it inevitably follows in the wake of birth. As it is an integral part of nature, there is no need to fear it.

At this point, there is an important accompanying principle to consider: although death is certain, the precise time of death is not. Our lives may be long or short. There is no clear marker to predict how long we will live. We should use this second principle as an inducement for vigilance and heedfulness. In other words, we should hasten to fulfil our responsibilities. We should endeavour to perform those deeds bringing about benefit and excellence to our lives. Our lives will thus become increasingly meaningful and rewarding. And after we die, we will leave a positive legacy for later generations.

Reflecting on Death to Understand the True Nature of Life

On a more profound level, Buddhism teaches to reflect on death as an aspect of nature. Here, one discerns the truth of life, that it has a natural beginning and an end. By reflecting in this way, the mind is not overwhelmed and afflicted by suffering resulting from the separation inherent in death – a reality one faces even when contemplating one's own mortality. With such discernment, people are aware of the natural order of things.

They abide continually at ease; they reflect on death without fear and apprehension. They live wisely – they act with a true understanding of things as they are. In other words, people comprehend the law of causality. They accomplish those tasks worthy of action and they attend to those problems requiring a solution by acting in line with causes and conditions.

Varied Responses Towards Death

The various attitudes and responses towards death which express the spiritual maturity of people can be summarized as threefold: 1) the majority of unawakened persons – referred to in the scriptures as those who have not 'listened', that is, who have not been trained – think of death with fear and gloom; 2) on a higher level, those individuals at initial stages of awakening, who have listened to the teachings and undergone training, think of death as a recollection (*anussati*) and as a reminder to be vigilant; they persevere in their spiritual practice, fulfilling their duties and developing virtue to bring about a life of refinement and dignity;[6] 3) on the highest level, people have a comprehensive understanding of death, knowing that it is an integral part of nature. As a result, their lives are free from all affliction, and they are no longer tormented by any form of fear, for instance by the fear of separation. Their minds are spacious and at ease. All of their actions are accompanied by wisdom: by a thorough understanding of the law of conditionality.

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[6] Trans.: note that the term 'noble disciple' (*ariya-sāvaka*) does not exclusively refer to an enlightened person; this term sometimes refers to a 'disciple of the Buddha, the Noble One', rather than to a 'disciple who is a noble one'. This is how it should be understood in this context.

These modes of conduct are not limited to the subject of death; they are applicable to many other aspects of life. It is useful at this point to focus on the second mode which is given special emphasis in the Buddhist teachings. At this stage, people use the recollection of death as an incentive for engaging in wholesome activities.

Generally, people use many different incentives for their actions. Often, however, these incentives are not particularly skilful or virtuous; they are at odds with the considerations and motives recommended in Buddhism. Occasionally, they are ambiguous – they exist as a mix of skilful and unskilful incentives.

What are some common incentives and motivations? One common incentive for people's actions is the affliction in their own hearts – their inner unhappiness (*dukkha*) and their accumulated mental defilements (*kilesa*). Generally speaking, people require some form of catalyst or impetus propelling them to act. But this catalyst is often their inner agitation; they act as a response to their own discontent and distress. Frequently, they are unable to act simply from pure understanding: from unfettered reasoned discernment. Instead, they are spurred into action due to some form of stress: for example due to fear or to some pressing dilemma. In particular, mental defilements often drive people to put forth effort and to act. These oppressive defilements are threefold: 1) *lobha*: greed; 2) *dosa*: hatred, anger, aversion, hostility, resentment, and so on; and 3) *moha*: delusion, which is expressed by fear or mistrust, for example.

Effort Boosted by Virtue

Buddhism encourages people to strive and persevere by using the power of spiritual virtues as the motivation for action, instead of being driven by the mental impurities of greed, hatred, and delusion. For instance, one applies wise reflection (for example the recollection on death – *maraṇassati*), faith, and compassion as a wakeup call and incentive for making effort. One actively performs good deeds, inspired by one's inner virtuous qualities, without needing to be goaded on by inner turmoil or mental defilement. One maintains constant vigilance and care. This marks the difference between the struggles made by many unawakened persons and actions performed in conformity with Buddhist teachings: in the former case, people are compelled and driven by the power of defilement; in the latter case, people persevere by harnessing the power of virtue. (This refers to the second mode of conduct described above, of a reliance on skilful incentive and motivation for action.)

Insight into the True Nature of Life

Buddhism urges people to engage in self-training in order to make continual spiritual progress. Here, a person develops from the first mode of conduct – of an unawakened state of discouragement and despair – to a mode of striving to do good by using spiritual virtues as a reminder and motivation. Finally, one develops to the final mode, of comprehensive understanding of truth and of acting in conformity with causes and conditions. For most people, Buddhism usually emphasizes the second, intermediate mode – of using spiritual virtue as an incentive.

In the context of recollection on death, however, we see a combined approach, namely:

- The application of wisdom (inherent to the third mode) to investigate natural laws – to recognize that death is a part of nature, death is paired with birth, all that is born must die, and so forth. Such understanding leads to inner peace.
- At the same time, one reflects on how death is certain, yet the exact time of death is not. One thus applies inner virtues as a source of motivation.

For this reason, while we are still alive, we should hasten to perform good deeds. This is the essence of the principle of 'recollection on death', which dovetails with a teaching from the Tipiṭaka urging us to contemplate death and maintain vigilance:

Na heva tiṭṭhaṃ nāsīnaṃ na sayānaṃ na patthaguṃ

The life faculty[7] is independent of people's heedless behaviour while they are standing, walking, sitting, and lying down.'

People themselves may be heedless, neglecting those things worthy of attention and allowing time to pass in vain. Despite this heedless behaviour, life-sustaining forces are never remiss: they inexorably proceed in line with the three characteristics. They are impermanent, unable to sustain an original form, and ultimately insubstantial. They are not subject to our control. They follow the incessant stream of mutability and ephemerality. As the body and mind are constantly subject to this natural law of transience and flux, we should not be careless or complacent. The teaching continues:

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[7] *Āyu-saṅkhāra:* 'life-sustaining forces', 'vital power', 'vital force', 'life force', 'life-sustaining functions'.

Tasmā idha jīvitasese kiccakaro siyā naro na ca majjeti

'Therefore, in our remaining lifespans, we should take care and fulfil our responsibilities.'

In such a manner, we can apply our insight into natural laws skilfully and constructively.

As mentioned earlier, birth and death are intimately entwined. On the few occasions when the Buddhist teachings discuss birth, they do so as a reminder that birth induces or steers us towards death. These teachings give rise to effort and healthy caution. If Buddhism were to mention birth in a way that panders to most people's desires, it would only incite people to fall further into intoxication and carelessness. For this reason, the teachings take an opposite tack, urging people to enter a course of reflection and conduct leading to virtue and goodness.

A complimentary teaching occurs in a Dhammapada verse, encouraging those of us born into the human realm to cultivate wholesome and virtuous qualities:

Yathāpi puppharāsimhā kayirā mālāguḷe bahū
Evaṃ jātena maccena kattabbaṃ kusalaṃ bahuṃ

'Just as a skilled florist threads a heap of flowers into a beautiful garland, so too, we should make the greatest use of wholesome qualities in this lifetime.'

The Buddha did not discuss birth in order to indulge people's desires and intensify their excitement and delight. Instead, he would remind them to be diligent and heedful, urging them to use this opportunity of life to increase wholesome qualities. Similarly, he would refer to death in the same light, encouraging people to do good.

Generating Blessings Through Life's Circumstances

Today, friends and relatives have gathered together as a dedication and memorial, recollecting the merits of the deceased and wishing her well. The benefits of such ceremonies are not limited to these single acts of kindness. Everyone attending these ceremonies also benefits, in that they are an occasion to cultivate mindfulness and wisdom. As I mentioned earlier, Buddhists are encouraged to use every situation or circumstance in life to bring about virtue, goodness, and prosperity, regardless of whether the circumstances are desirable or not.

Most of us think of death as undesirable. It causes anguish and sorrow for those who cherish the deceased. Yet the reality is that the deceased have passed on. Buddhists are exhorted to use such occasions to bring about value and wellbeing, by cultivating goodness in line with Buddhist principles.

This is evident today, whereby benefits are accrued by wise recollection and meritorious deeds. Death is not limited to the passing of an individual. Rather it has wider implications, namely, it is of value to those who know how to reflect wisely, who respond to death skilfully and maintain a healthy state of mind. They use such occasions as this one to bring about heedfulness and to make haste in cultivating virtue. Their insights into truth bring about an end of suffering and sorrow. They engage in meritorious activities, consisting of generosity, virtuous conduct, and mental cultivation.

Benefits of a Funeral Service

Death is one of the important rites of passage of a person's life. As an isolated event, it simply refers to the passing away of an individual born into this world, according to the laws of nature. Having departed, the deceased have no way to return, despite our entreaties and supplications. Such efforts to bring back the dead are futile. Buddhists, however, are encouraged to reflect on death and perform wholesome deeds, leading to various beneficial results.

Making Merit at Times of Death

There are numerous ways to engage in meritorious activities in relation to death. Although many such methods are mentioned in the Buddhist teachings, they can be summarized as consisting of three main factors:

1) *Dāna*: generosity; giving.
2) *Sīla*: moral conduct; righteous physical and verbal actions.
3) *Bhāvanā*: training the mind; meditation; wisdom development.

Generosity

Generosity is a fundamental form of merit-making that is clearly visible on the physical level. In Buddhist cultures, friends and family traditionally invite members of the monastic sangha for a meal and provide other material offerings. This is a common method of generating goodness and dedicating it to

the deceased. Moreover, it is a means for supporting Buddhism and for nourishing monks engaging in and fulfilling religious responsibilities.

It is important, however, not to see making offerings as the culmination of meritorious action. One should also apply wise reflection to contemplate the reality of human life, discerning the natural trajectory of birth, old age, sickness, and finally death. This accords with the saying: 'Born, we arrive alone; dying, we depart alone.'

Furthermore, one should reflect: 'No matter how many material possessions we accumulate during our lifetimes – we are unable to take any of them with us after death.'

Discerning in this way, people are able to dispel greed, attachment, and covetousness. At the same time, they eliminate stinginess, which accompanies an attachment to material wealth. They thus lay the foundation for the cultivation of generosity. Generosity can be practised in many ways, including giving in order to assist others, to provide for those under one's care, to make donations honouring virtuous individuals, or to perform other acts of service. One thereby makes the best use of material wealth.

These are examples of how generosity can be developed from a healthy recollection of death.

Moral Conduct

The same principle of 'arriving alone, departing alone' can be used in the context of moral conduct. Connected to this principle is the reflection that at death we leave nothing

behind. It is true that we leave a body behind, but the body does not last forever; indeed, after only a few days it begins to fester and rot. The four elements – earth, water, air and fire – are scattered in the wind.[8] Nothing truly remains that can be pointed to as a lasting form or personality. Here, we are talking about external conditions – of the body and materiality.

We are born alone and we die alone. And we leave nothing behind. Yet a deeper examination reveals that, indeed, there is something we leave behind and there is something that follows us after death.

In the same vein, according to the Buddha's teachings, just as there is something that follows us after death, there is something that arrives with us at birth. This refers to good and bad karma.[9] Karma accompanies us at birth and follows us into the next life at our death. If our volitional actions are positive and beneficial they are referred to as wholesome (*kusala*) and meritorious (*puñña*), as 'meritorious action',[10] which serves as a safety and refuge in the future.

The Buddha said:

Puññāni paralokasmiṃ patiṭṭhā honti pāṇinaṃ

'Goodness is the protection for beings in the world beyond; this is what follows and remains.'

The same holds true for what is left behind. The deceased leave behind their good and bad actions for posterity. Their

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[8] Trans.: 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust.'

[9] Trans.: Karma (Sanskrit)/kamma (Pali): technically, this term refers to volitional actions performed by way of body, speech, and mind. Loosely speaking, it can also refer to the 'fruits of volitional actions' – the consequences of our deliberate actions performed in the past.

[10] *Puñña-kamma.*

actions, some of which produce concrete, material results, are engraved in the world they leave behind.

For instance, a philanthropist produces items for the public good which are lasting, solid evidence of their virtue. The legacy may also be immaterial. For example, someone may be of service to others, beginning with their own family members. This goodness is etched in the hearts of the survivors, who have been the recipients of these kind deeds. The fruits of a person's actions thus outlive them.

In sum, what is left behind and what accompanies people after death are the results of their good and bad actions. Aware of this truth, wise people strive to live their lives uprightly and virtuously, so that at the time of death they have a store of goodness both to leave behind and to take with them. Benefiting from the legacy of goodness bequeathed to later generations, surviving friends and relatives will remember the excellence of the deceased, praising their venerable and worthy qualities.

Doing Good by Observing Moral Precepts

Essentially, observing moral precepts is a way of conducting one's life in harmony with truth. As a consequence one lives uprightly and established in virtue. This moral conduct begins by observing the five precepts, namely:

- Abstaining from killing living creatures (*pāṇātipāta*)
- Abstaining from stealing (*adinnādāna*)
- Abstaining from sexual misconduct (*kāmesu-micchācāra*)
- Abstaining from false and offensive speech (*musāvāda*)

- Abstaining from drinking alcoholic beverages that cause heedlessness and impair mindfulness (*surāmeraya-majjapamādaṭṭhāna*)

These are vital principles for avoiding moral decline. Moreover, they promote harmonious social coexistence, bringing about ease and joy in society. Wise reflection on death encourages people to abide by these moral principles, leading to personal and communal wellbeing. Here, one attends to the stage of virtuous conduct (*sīla*): to righteous physical and verbal deeds. This lays the foundation for the next stage of meritorious action: mental development.

Mental Development

The Pali word *bhāvanā* refers to cultivating the mind and developing wisdom. As a consequence, the mind becomes tranquil, joyous, and bright – free from mental blemish and defilement – and increases in virtuous qualities. In addition, wisdom – a discernment into the truth of all things – deepens.

An obvious principle associated with mental development is the formal recollection of death taught by the Buddha. This recollection, however, must be practised correctly, ensuring that it leads to true spiritual prosperity and fulfilment. Some people, after reflecting on death, feel uneasy, agitated, troubled, or afraid. This reveals a misguided recollection, leading to harmful consequences.

Suitable and effective recollection implies understanding the truth of nature. We contemplate that our human lives begin at birth, are sustained for a period of time, and finally end with the separation of death. We recognize the clear and abundant

evidence surrounding us of this natural truth. As death is a law of nature, we have to accept it. With such acceptance, we will be ready to integrate our understanding into our daily lives and to consider ways in which to skilfully relate to death.

The first skilful response is to avoid being infatuated and enthralled with those things with which we come into contact. We are unable to truly possess any of these things; they do not really belong to us. Ownership is simply a convention we assume when making use of objects in the world. In order to derive the greatest benefit from these things, we should use them for the good of ourselves and others. Do not be so beguiled by them that they end up causing harm. At the moment of death – the time of inevitable separation – heedless people, who have neglected to reflect wisely on death, suffer as a consequence of clinging to their possessions. They feel that they are being compelled to part with their cherished belongings, leading to anguish and despair.

People who have a comprehensive understanding of nature, on the other hand, are able to accept and come to terms with death. Both during their lifetimes and at the time of death, they abide attentive and serene. They do not indulge in or become obsessed over things. When relating to objects in the world, they derive the greatest benefit from them, without causing unnecessary difficulty.

Besides not indulging in things, wise people are diligent and circumspect. They recognize the inescapable truth that death befalls all life; every living organism must die.

Yet within this certainty of death lies an uncertainty, namely, we cannot determine beforehand the exact time of death. We cannot claim with certainty that a child or

adolescent must invariably live to a ripe old age. This is uncertain. Similarly, we cannot specify that an elderly person will surely die before a young one. Sometimes circumstances occur that bring about the death of the young; sometimes an old, frail person defies all odds and lives on. These are matters that we cannot predict.

The proper response to such uncertainty is to be careful and vigilant. We should make the best use of time, live a virtuous life, and hasten to fulfil our responsibilities. Do not procrastinate; do not let time slip way in vain. Strive to do wholesome deeds. Such a heedful and diligent life is a benefit obtained from wise recollection on death.

Another teaching the Buddha emphasized is that everyone we encounter in life, including ourselves, must eventually go his or her separate way. Although we may live with some people for decades, in truth, this span of time is short and fleeting. Moreover, during this short period of time, swayed by mental defilements, people often engage in all sorts of mutual abuse, exploitation, and oppression.

If we are aware of this truth, that we live together on this earth for a short time, after which we must disperse and go our own separate ways, we will foster a sense of mutual kindness, graciousness, and benevolence.

When someone dies, we are encouraged to see this as a natural occurrence; to accept it. When someone's time is up, he or she must depart. Do not get caught up in grief for the person who has passed away. Instead, consider the people who are still alive, with whom we share this world. Think of how you can live with others in kindness and appreciation. This way, when someone dies, we need not grieve and lament.

We remember that when we lived together we did our best to live in harmony. We have no regrets that we neglected our companions.

It is therefore our present existence that is vital. Do not grieve for those who have passed on; instead, share kindness with your living companions. This is another benefit stemming from recollection on death, pertaining to mental development.[11] If one is able to sustain wise recollection and guide mental attention along such a skilful path, the mind will be peaceful, free of anxiety and trepidation. Moreover, one will grow in virtue. For instance, one will set the wholesome intent to perform good deeds, be diligent, and establish a heart of goodwill towards fellow human beings. This creates a life of value, both individual and social.

When people possess this deeper insight into reality, discerning the three characteristics,[12] of impermanence (*anicca*), unendurability (*dukkha*), and insubstantiality (*anattā*), they are primed for purity and deliverance of the heart. They understand the true nature of all things. Accessing this level of understanding – this penetration into the truth of human existence – leads to the realization of arahantship – the complete end of all mental impurity.

Recollection of death is advantageous at all stages of spiritual practice, from the initial stage of generosity involving material things and pertaining to one's external relationships, to higher stages of mental development, all the way to the realization of Nibbāna.

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11 *Citta-bhāvanā.*

12 *Tilakkhaṇa.*

Today, friends and relatives of the deceased have been contemplating death with a wholesome state of mind, demonstrating such qualities as gratitude, the duties of a relative,[13] and the principles of service.[14] To the extent that those who have passed away recognize and acknowledge the goodness performed by the participants on this occasion, they will delight and rejoice.

Appreciation and delight by the departed is considered a vital factor for bringing meritorious action to fulfilment. Aware of this dynamic, those of us who are still alive should sustain wholesome states of mind, for it is precisely this wholesomeness that facilitates the appreciation by those who have passed away. The more wholesome our state of mind, the greater the delight experienced by the deceased.

Besides maintaining a wholesome state of mind, we increase our goodness by cultivating generosity, virtuous conduct, and mental development, as described above.[15] This is a blessing both for the deceased and for those still alive.

On this occasion, compose your minds, knowing that you have done what is proper in relation to the deceased. Reflecting on what we have aptly accomplished is one way to make the mind bright and peaceful, thus dispelling grief and sorrow. We thus fill our hearts with goodness and establish ourselves to live with ever greater dignity and integrity.

By composing our minds in goodness, everyone here is united in sharing the goodness with the deceased. This

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[13] *Ñāti-dhamma.*
[14] *Saṅgaha-dhamma.*
[15] *Dāna, sīla, bhāvanā.*

dedication fulfils the factor of 'meritorious action by way of sharing one's goodness with others'.[16] And in terms of the deceased, they fulfil the factor of 'merit by way of rejoicing in the goodness of others'.[17]

Today, I have given a talk on meritorious action, linking it to the truth of mortality, with the aim that reflecting on this subject will be of benefit to all those present. At this point, as Pali verses of appreciation are chanted, may you, the collected friends and relatives, compose your minds and pour water as a symbolic dedication of goodness for the deceased.

[16] *Pattidāna-maya.*
[17] *Pattānumodanā-maya.*

2. Contented in Life – Joyous at Death[18]

While still moving and breathing, we are alive. When life ends, we die. Life is paired with death – life and death.

From another perspective, however, death represents one side of a coin, namely an ending. Before arriving at the moment when the curtain falls – the moment of death – life has proceeded along its trajectory from a point of commencement: the moment of birth. The beginning is paired with the ending. From this perspective, death is not the opposite of life. Rather, death is paired with birth – birth and death.

Most people are limited by the first perspective, of pairing life with death. When they think of death, they associate it with life. This can create a stumbling block. They are stuck with the perception of 'life and death'. This firm conviction that death is the opposite of life is intrinsically tied up with a belief in 'self' – in a fixed, substantial individuality. Thoughts of death then automatically have a bearing on this assumed self. Death is seen as a threat against, or an extinguishment of, a cherished self. People tremble with such thoughts as: 'I'm going to die!' I will be deprived of life!' I will cease to exist!'

For this reason, when most people think of death, see a corpse, or encounter death in other ways, they feel afraid, anxious, grief-stricken, or dispirited. Alternatively, if they consider the death of an enemy, they may rejoice and feel delighted.

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[18] Title of Thai manuscript: อยู่ก็สบาย ตายก็เป็นสุข.

Most frequently, people fall into the habit of thinking in this way. In some cultures, language is confined to expressing this dual concept of 'life and death'. As a consequence, people often fail to discern the genuine pairing of 'birth and death'. In many cultures, birth and death are not paired in colloquial conversation – they are seen as distinct, unrelated concepts, and are mentioned in separate contexts. This line of thinking potentially gives rise to imbalanced, disjointed ways of conducting one's life. Birth is seen as an opportunity for celebration and delight. Death is seen as a cause for grief, lamentation, and despair. In between these two events, people forget themselves, become spellbound, and compete with others for fame and riches. Their lives are not guided by mindfulness and wisdom, virtues which generate true benefits for individuals and society.

In contrast, if we view death as paired with birth, we will not become entangled by a rigid sense of self. Instead, we focus on two liminal events. We see life as simply an aspect of nature; we observe it as we do external phenomena. Moreover, we will recognize that life is a dynamic process shaped by causes and conditions, beginning with birth and ending at death. Such discernment is in harmony with truth; we gain an insight into life as it truly is. Moreover, it leads to the alleviation, and even transcendence, of fear and grief when thinking of or witnessing death, or even when faced by one's own impending death.

No one is spared from death. This being the case, we should develop a healthy attitude towards it, one that benefits us most and harms us least. The Buddha urged people to reflect on death. He gave numerous teachings on this subject, depending on the context and audience. For those people viewing death as an end to their own personal existence, he taught them to shift

their perspective and thus adjust their fearful and despairing emotional response to death to a more constructive attitude. On other occasions, he encouraged people to apply wisdom which leads to complete peace and liberation.

Skilled reflection on death is called *maraṇassati*. Its methods and fruits of practice can be summed up as follows:

Emphasis on a wholesome emotional response:

• One should reflect on the brevity of human life and the uncertainty of determining the exact span of one's life. We don't know if we will die today or tomorrow. By reflecting in this way, we will value time and be vigilant. We will hasten to fulfil our responsibilities, cultivate virtue, and engage in training, so that our lives have meaning and we reach the supreme goal.

• Wealth, personal possessions, and even cherished friends and family, do not really belong to us. We are not their true owners. We are unable to prevent the death of our loved ones, and after they have departed we cannot follow them. Material things are for us to use in this world. Similarly, human relationships are sustained in the context of this lifetime.

A. In respect to wealth and possessions, we should not fan the flames of greed, accumulate things immoderately, or become wasteful or miserly. We should become skilled at using and sharing material objects so as to benefit ourselves, our friends and family, and our fellow human beings. We recognize the true value and meaning of material things.

B. In respect to cherished people and to those under our care, we should avoid being overly attached and possessive, which will give rise to excessive suffering and agitation, or

even to going half-crazy, at times of inevitable separation. We realize that these people will not always exist in our lives. Moreover, we assist these people by encouraging them to be self-reliant.

C. In respect to people in general, we should foster compassion and provide assistance. Despite any irritation or conflict we may experience, we should make an effort to dispel any negative emotions. What is the point of getting angry? Before long, death will inevitably lead us in separate ways. While alive, it is better to cultivate mutual affection and to perform acts of kindness.

• Everyone is the owner of his or her volitional actions (karma). All that we really own is our karma; karma is our true inheritance, following us into the future. Our destiny is shaped by the deeds we have performed. Recognizing this truth, we avoid and abandon all unwholesome actions, and, instead, we perform wholesome actions. Furthermore, we use whatever wealth we possess to develop goodness.

When we encounter death firsthand, such skilful reflection yields further significant results:

A. When confronted with one's own death, by recollecting the wholesome deeds one has performed, and not detecting any lingering unwholesome mind states, contentment and delight arises. One can face death peacefully and with clear mindfulness. And even before this time, one lives with confidence. One is not apprehensive of lurking dangers and one harbours no fear of death.

B. When faced with the death of another, one quickly comes to terms with it, considering how everyone is the owner of

their karma. This person has departed according to their destiny, in conformity with the actions they performed. Our crying and mourning is of no help. As a consequence, one experiences no grief, or if grief does arise, one is able to dispel it quickly.

When we are able to accept the death of others, we turn our attention back to those people still living whom we have often neglected. These are the people we can help. If they suffer any affliction, we should try to alleviate their pain. At the very least, we should look on them with kindly eyes. We gain a penetrating insight, recognizing that we cannot help those people already departed. Before long, those people still alive will also pass away. We should treat these people with kindness while there is still a chance. Otherwise, we will have the regret: 'Oh dear, I had good intentions, but I left it too late.'

• Everyone dreads injury; everyone fears death; everyone cherishes his or her life. In this respect, other people are no different from ourselves. With such consideration, one should refrain from killing or harming others. This reflection gives rise to compassion and non-violence. Instead, people offer mutual assistance and live together in harmony. We treat others as we treat ourselves, in line with the adage: 'Do unto others as you would want them to do unto you.' Acting in this way one creates a peaceful, happy world.

Emphasis on wisdom:

• Life is subject to the laws of nature. It begins with birth and naturally comes to a conclusion at death. With birth there must invariably be death; whatever is born must die. Life is inherently endowed with birth, old age, sickness, and death.

Death is a part of nature. These are the features of impermanence. Everyone is subject to these laws. Impermanence thus runs its course. This being so, why be distraught? Reflecting in this way dispels fear and anguish.

• At this stage, one gains insight into the nature of conditioned phenomena (*saṅkhāra*).[19] One penetrates the truth that life itself is a conditioned phenomenon; it is dependent on the convergence of myriad subsidiary components; it is made possible by conditioning factors. It is impermanent; it is subject to termination. Birth and death are equally a part of life. This refers not only to human life; everything in the world, material and mental, including the attendant factors enabling life, falls under the sway of the law of impermanence. They all arise, are sustained, and dissolve. Their traits and features are governed by causes and conditions. They do not follow the desires and attachments of anyone. If a person wishes for something to exist in a particular way, they must attend to necessary causes and conditions.

When one clearly understands this truth, one escapes from all clinging and grasping. The mind is free, secure, pure, and luminous. One abides in and acts from wisdom. One experiences continual ease and satisfaction. One has gone beyond all suffering, arriving at true peace and liberation.

Those people who develop a healthy emotional response towards death conduct themselves in line with the following Buddhist sayings:

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[19] This stage is the interface between reflection on death (*maraṇassati*) and insight meditation (*vipassanā*).

Nowhere have I committed any evil; therefore, I fear not impending death.[20]

Firmly grounded in the Dhamma, one need not fear the next life.[21]

Those people who are fully enlightened and endowed with liberating wisdom relate to life and death in line with these sayings:

When living, one is untroubled; when dying, one is griefless. Although surrounded by grief, a sage, realizing the goal, grieves not.[22]

I do not rejoice in death; I am not attached to life. I will discard this body with established mindfulness and clear comprehension.

I do not rejoice in death; I am not attached to life. I wait for my time, as a servant who has finished work waits for his wages.[23]

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[20] J. VI. 312.
[21] S. I. 43.
[22] Ud. 46.
[23] Thag. verses 1002-1003.

3. The Meaning of Life: an Inquiry and Reminder[24]

Today I will give a Dhamma talk outlining the advantages obtained from hosting a merit-making ceremony in dedication of the departed.

Family members and friends have gathered today to honour the departed. Such occasions, when someone dear to us has passed away, are often a time of great grief and sorrow. By organizing a memorial service, friends and relatives seek a skilful means to express their gratitude to the departed and to alleviate their sadness.

Such memorial services are also a reminder, giving us the opportunity to reflect on the Buddha's teachings and contemplate the true meaning of life. These reflections give rise to wisdom, which helps to further alleviate sadness.

These religious ceremonies thus nourish the heart on two levels. First, we perform wholesome deeds, expressing our kindness and gratitude towards the departed. And secondly, we foster a deeper understanding of life. Together, these benefits are able to diminish, or even dispel, our sadness, and they help us to grow in virtue. This is a blessing for both the person who has passed away and for those of us still alive.

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[24] Title of Thai manuscript: ความจริงแห่งชีวิต: บททดสอบใจและเตือนให้นึกถึงความจริง.

Paying back the Debt to Previous Benefactors

By performing wholesome deeds, we fulfil our social responsibilities, of which we have several, depending on our interpersonal relationships. There are specific duties of a parent, sibling, relative, teacher, and so on. In this context, we observe the 'duties to relatives,'[25] accompanied by the 'virtues of friendship'[26] and the 'principles of service'.[27]

Once someone has passed away, the ways in which we can now help them are obviously limited. We therefore rely on religious merit-making ceremonies to dedicate goodness and express goodwill to the deceased. In these circumstances, we fulfil our duties to relatives.

By fulfilling these duties, we also express our gratitude. This is particularly true in relation to our parents – our benefactors and guardians. We remember their virtue with love and affection. We do not neglect or forget them.

While our parents are alive, we can care for them with material things. This care and support is consistent with the Buddha's teachings. When we were young, our parents looked after us. When our parents become elderly, we should look after them in return. For instance, we may take over any unfinished work or business activities.

In terms of behaviour, children should make the effort to be good citizens and virtuous heirs. By maintaining virtuous conduct, they are able to make their parents feel happy and at ease. Moreover, by living a virtuous life, for example by

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[25] *Ñāti-dhamma.*
[26] *Mitta-dhamma.*
[27] *Saṅgaha-dhamma.*

being diligent and hardworking and achieving success in their endeavours, children sustain the legacy of the family – they maintain the family's honour and dignity – thus fulfilling one of the parents' wishes and making them happy. The children thus become worthy of inheriting their parents' estate.

Conversely, if children behave badly, most parents become distressed. One can even say that the happiness and suffering of parents hinges, for the most part, on their children.

Besides dedicating goodness or merit on behalf of our deceased parents, we should also recollect the virtues that they embodied and remember the virtuous aspirations they had for us. We then try and live up to them. This includes completing any important work that they may have left unfinished. To begin with, however, we can make a clear statement expressing our gratitude by organizing a memorial service in dedication of our parents.

Inquiring into the Meaning of Life

That life has a beginning and an end is considered by the Buddhist teachings to be completely natural. But it is an aspect of nature that most people find disagreeable; it is an undesirable phenomenon.[28] Most people do not welcome death. And yet it is inescapable. As a law of nature, it is inevitable and certain. Although one may not wish, or even expect, for death to happen, once it does occur, we should accept the truth.

We can use this acceptance as part of spiritual examination, as a means for evaluating our Dhamma practice. If we can

[28] *Aniṭṭhārammaṇa.*

cultivate such acceptance, we will be able to derive benefit even from difficult situations such as someone close to us dying. We acknowledge: 'Oh, the truth is this way.' We recognize that the reality of death accords with the Buddha's teachings, that everything in the world naturally arises, is sustained, and disintegrates. Human life, having begun with birth, must end in death. We have no choice in the matter. The challenge is this: being faced with death, how do we respond to it? Those who have engaged in proper spiritual training and development are able to quickly compose their minds and restore a sense of balance.

The Buddha taught that, by living in the world, people must experience 'worldly conditions'.[29] If they have not trained themselves, when they encounter something undesirable, they experience distress. They become downcast and deflated. If they encounter something desirable, say gain or praise, they are delighted or exalted, sometimes to the point of intoxication. They feel inflated and lose themselves in the object. Their delight is not the measured joy and satisfaction appropriate to acquiring such an object. They get carried away. Such responses may give rise to all sorts of harmful consequences and mental impurities.

Those who are well-trained, on the other hand, have an insight into the laws of nature and act with wisdom. When they encounter a positive, agreeable object, they feel a healthy sense of joy and satisfaction, but they do not get carried away. Similarly, if they encounter something disagreeable, like loss or separation, they can readily come to terms with the

[29] *Loka-dhamma;* 'worldly winds'. [Trans.: gain and loss, praise and blame, happiness and suffering, fame and obscurity.]

situation, equipped with their understanding. They do not fall into despondence or despair. As unawakened beings, they may still feel some sadness, but not for long. They incline towards greater spiritual growth and establish themselves in wisdom, thus generating wholesome states, restoring equilibrium, and achieving clarity of mind.

The gist of this matter is insight and understanding. Having engaged in spiritual study and training, the true test of success in practice is the depth of our understanding, which has a direct bearing on maintaining ease and wellbeing in all situations and progressing on the path of truth and wisdom.

And, in this context, the central focus of insight and understanding is the law of impermanence.

The Buddhist teachings highlight impermanence. Even those people living in Thailand – a Buddhist country – who do not have the specific intent to study Buddhism, are familiar with such expressions as '*aniccaṃ*' ('impermanent'), 'the dynamic of change', and 'arising, being sustained, and ceasing'.

The Buddha taught that all things are subject to change and fluctuation; they are uncertain. One day things may exist in a particular fashion; the next day they may have changed. Look at our own lives. They are constantly subject to this inconstancy and uncertainty. We sometimes experience joy; at other times we experience sorrow. We may be happily cruising along, when, unexpectedly, we wake up miserable. In the morning we may be laughing, while in the evening we may be in a funk. This is the way things are.

There are many ways of reflecting on birth and death. For instance, from the instant of being born, our lives are on an

unswerving trajectory towards demise. Life heads in only one direction, namely, its termination. The only choice we have is to decide how best to live our lives in between these two junctures.

'In the morning we see our many companions; in the evening some of them may have passed away. In the evening we see our many companions; in the morning some are no longer to be found.' This fact of life needs to be attended to with vigilance and wise discernment.

A short while ago we may have met up with a friend. Later, someone tells us that he has passed away. We may simply exclaim: 'What? How? I just met him and he looked so healthy. You tell me he has died?' This happens frequently. Those people who have not previously reflected on death and contemplated the law of impermanence will not gain any benefit from such circumstances. If one has reflected wisely on impermanence and uncertainty, however, one's knowledge and understanding will hold one in good stead.

Changes resulting from the law of impermanence are conspicuous and easily revealed. For instance, we could point to the flowers arranged here next to the casket. Right now they are fresh and beautiful. But soon, within a few days, they will gradually wither and decay.

From a Dhamma perspective, these floral arrangements can be seen as another reminder of truth. They remind us that our lives are no different from these flowers. Flowers and plants are also living organisms. Indeed, observing flowers provides a poignant reminder, as we watch them transform from being bright and colourful, to drooping and shrivelled. Such

an observation gives us a vivid memento for our own lives.

Similarly, the candles and incense on the shrine can be looked at in two ways. On the one hand, they are devotional objects used for respecting and commemorating the deceased. On the other hand, they remind us of impermanence. We can observe how the lit candles gradually grow shorter, are consumed, and disappear. So it is with our own life, which begins with birth, gradually diminishes and declines, and eventually ceases.

On a deeper level, we can gain insight into how life is sustained by conditioning factors. The reason why the candle flame burns steadily is due to various supporting conditions, including the wax acting as fuel, the wick, and oxygen, which nourishes the flame. Our lives are the same; they rely on various supportive factors in order to exist.

Advantages from an Insight into the Laws of Nature

Even if specific natural laws come across as unsatisfactory or undesirable, it is still vital for us to understand them so that we are able to conduct our lives correctly. Roughly speaking, one can say there are three kinds of benefit to be derived from such insight and understanding:

1. Benefits stemming from complying with basic natural laws in order to live well and to avoid danger and affliction.

2. Benefits stemming from applying our knowledge of laws to manage and create useful things in accord with our wishes.

3. Benefits connected to our inner lives, whereby we cultivate a healthy conduct and attitude bringing about genuine and lasting happiness.

These three factors may at first seem difficult to comprehend. They can be elucidated by examples.

The first factor is a skilful compliance with natural laws, whereby we access a basic level of wellbeing. We observe our dependence on the natural environment and on natural elements, which have traditionally been summed up as earth, water, air, and fire.

An example of fire is heat radiating from the sun. Sunlight has many benefits: drying clothes, dispelling humidity, and so forth. If we want to dry our clothes, we rely on this specific law of nature, hanging our clothing out in the sun to dry.

Likewise, farmers observe the seasonal changes of nature. During particular months the rains will likely fall; they thus sow seeds at this time in order to grow crops. During the dry season, they attend to other tasks in the agricultural calendar. This is a way of living in harmony with nature and complying with its laws, in order to bring about fruitful results.

In regard to the second factor, besides complying with natural laws to access a basic degree of wellbeing, people use their knowledge to create things for their own convenience. For instance, people recognize the law of nature that by boiling water and compressing the steam, a pushing force is produced. This force can be so great that the pressurized chamber may explode. Using this knowledge, they can create machines that are of great benefit. For instance, they have invented steamboats and steam locomotives, enabling them to travel

and transport goods over long distances.

These days, people possess the knowledge of atomic fission and fusion. They apply this knowledge to build atomic reactors, thus harnessing nuclear power.

Using our knowledge of electricity, we create useful devices and appliances, for example electric fans, lightbulbs, and air conditioning units. These are all examples of how people apply their knowledge of natural laws for increasing convenience and comfort.

This increase in knowledge is part of human evolution. Before people had a more comprehensive understanding of particular natural laws, life was more difficult. Things improved with the increase of knowledge. Human societies have gradually progressed, to the point where now we invent all sorts of tools and implements for greater ease, enjoyment, and comfort. These are seen as hallmarks of advanced civilization.

In respect to the third factor, we apply our knowledge of natural laws – a wise understanding of the true nature of things – to generate genuine spiritual wellbeing. In respect to the first and second forms of benefit, people capitalize on a knowledge of phenomena existing within the external, physical environment. They use this knowledge to satisfy specific personal needs and desires. But their inner, personal lives might remain undeveloped. They have not yet gained a thorough understanding of the intricate workings of the mind. If we cultivate a more profound understanding of the laws of nature, we will gain insight into the heart and mind.[30]

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[30] Trans.: note that the Pali word *citta* encompasses the meaning of both 'heart' and 'mind'.

Many people fail to investigate the nature of their minds and the conditioned nature of the world in a more refined way. They are content with profiting from their knowledge of natural laws and satisfying personal desires. They throw themselves into various projects and enterprises, until some of them are convinced they possess brilliant skill and have vanquished nature.

Yet if we stop to think, we may realize that we have become enslaved by material things; we end up entrusting our happiness to them. We lack true freedom. We may even be unable to answer the questions: 'Why am I running around doing all these activities?' and 'What is the purpose of all this?' If we haven't engaged in such deeper reflection, it shows that our understanding of nature is still deficient. We do not understand ourselves.

In fact, the laws of nature governing external things and those governing internal, spiritual dynamics are essentially the same. If we have truly sharpened intelligence and honed wisdom, we will apply the knowledge we have gained about the outside, material world and direct it inwards, thus gaining a deep insight into the nature of the human mind.

In respect to the law of impermanence, we begin by observing our external world. Even those people profiting from their knowledge of laws of nature rely on their understanding of impermanence. Because things are changeable and inconstant, we are able to manage them. Engaging in what we call 'progress' is a form of bringing about change. In order to accomplish this, we recognize that change is dependent on causes and conditions. We therefore generate those causes and conditions necessary for bringing about the change we desire.

Buddhism teaches us to examine the truth in all things, including our own minds. We are encouraged to discern change – the arising, sustaining, and cessation in line with causal factors – in all aspects of our lives. If we can apply this understanding in a comprehensive way, we will develop a new attitude and acceptance towards life, whereby we engage with all things skilfully and harmoniously.

Many people rush about applying their knowledge of external natural laws without paying attention to their inner lives. They end up getting carried away by the world's pleasures without realizing that the human mind too is governed by natural laws. When change occurs in their personal lives, they are often caught unawares. They end up being overwhelmed by change, leading to disappointment and distress. Their understanding of nature is deficient. A genuine, comprehensive understanding also spans the inner dynamics of the heart and mind.

From Hankering after Delicious Flavours to Savouring the Pure Taste of Truth

The dynamic of change can be summed up as 'arising, being sustained, and ceasing', or in a nutshell: 'arising and ceasing'.

This process of arising and ceasing is what enables change, including the changes inherent in our lives. Viewed from a slightly longer span of time, this arising and ceasing refers to our literal birth and death. Yet in between this period – from infancy to a ripe old age of 70 or 80 – our bodies and minds undergo an incalculable number of 'arising-ceasing' cycles. In the scriptures, 'birth and death' is even described as occurring

in every moment.

Arising and ceasing occurs perpetually. By delving deeper into the law of impermanence, what we see is the constant process of arising and ceasing. This observation can give rise to profound insights. Even if we contemplate the basic fact that our lives begin with birth and end with death, this already provides us with a clearer understanding of an absolute, irrevocable truth.

Often, when people gain such insight, they may be alarmed or even frightened. This is because they have not considered these themes before. But when they become more familiar with these truths, they will gain a sense of ease. Change and instability will be seen as the normal course of things. The shining light of wisdom will bring about a spaciousness and clarity of mind.

Buddhism teaches us to face and accept the truth. In the end of the day, truth is inescapable; even if people deny it, it exists nonetheless. If we can cultivate a constant acceptance of truth, of the laws of nature, they will not trouble us; they will not impinge on our minds. But if we refuse to acknowledge them, they end up causing all sorts of disruption and misery. We then suffer twofold: first, we suffer from the inevitable ending and destruction of things; and second, we suffer from constant apprehension, before such ending actually occurs.

It is an understanding of the truth that brings about ease of mind. When a person becomes adept at this, their ease and joy is constant. In this context, the Buddha declared: 'The taste of truth surpasses all other flavours.'[31]

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[31] *Saccaṃ have sādhutaraṃ rasānaṃ*; S. I. 214; 'Truth is indeed the sweetest of tastes.'

Compare this to various beverages, which come in many flavours: sweet, tangy, salty, and so on. Really, though, which drink tastes the best? It is pure, plain water. When we are thirsty, nothing can compete with pure water. Although we may sometimes hanker after other flavours – sweet, zestful, tart, and so forth – the most delicious flavour is that of pure water.

Here, we can draw a parallel to life in a wider sense. In order to give our lives colour and texture, we may surround ourselves with various delightful embellishments and adornments, giving us a degree of comfort and pleasure. Yet accessing the truth is the supreme happiness. Those people who have realized the truth abide in pure happiness, similar to slaking one's thirst with pristine water. And this kind of joy and happiness is ultimately desired by everyone of us.

No matter how many lavish things we may seek out, we all have an undeniable wish to savour the taste of truth. If we make haste and realize the truth, we will abide in happiness day and night. Even if life presents us with other curious or astonishing flavours – sweet, bitter, rich, spicy, and so on – these will simply supplement the supreme taste of truth.

Those people obsessed with seeking out pleasant flavours and delightful sensations will be oblivious to the basic, pure taste of truth. This invariably leads to problems. Because they have not prepared and steadied their minds, getting caught up in anxiety or agitation, they end up unable to savour this pure taste even when it is within reach.

From a Buddhist point of view, the essential meaning of life is to realize the truth – to savour its unrivaled sweetness. As unawakened beings, it is normal to also seek out other flavours

and experiences – this is not seen as blameworthy. But these other flavours are simply supplementary. The emphasis and encouragement is on realizing the truth.

As mentioned earlier, when people first gain an insight into impermanence – into arising and ceasing – they may be startled or unsettled. But as they understand this process more intimately, and they truly come to terms with it, they develop a deep sense of ease. Their minds are constantly radiant, joyous, and content.

Conversely, if people remain ignorant of these truths, their lives can easily derail, lost in heedlessness and indulgence. Because they lack a spiritual anchor, they are prone to all sorts of mental afflictions. When they encounter disagreeable things at odds with their desires, they lack wise reflection. They feel irritated and distressed.

The Buddha said:

'Though one should live a hundred years, yet better, indeed, is a single day's life of one who comprehends how all things arise and pass away.'[32]

Yo ca vassasataṃ jīve apassaṃ udayabbayaṃ

Ekāhaṃ jīvitaṃ seyyo passato udayabbayaṃ

A realization of truth has a direct bearing on our lives. As a consequence, we are not limited to an indiscriminate delight in our own external creations in order to satisfy personal desires without ever realizing the true meaning of life.

Wise people apply their knowledge of nature to live in

[32] Dh. verse 113.

harmony with its laws and to produce useful items that make life more convenient and comfortable. But they are fully aware of suitable boundaries. They understand the nature of life. They know the scope and sphere of pleasure; they know how it is generated and what its limitations are. They are thus fully satisfied and contented. They do not entirely entrust their happiness to external things.

External, Cosmetic Pleasure vs Internal, Pristine Happiness

Although they may possess a certain understanding of natural laws, many people are still faced with problems. They apply their knowledge while engaging in activities and enterprises without proper reflection, with the following implications:

- They cater to and increase mental defilements, thus escalating social conflict and turmoil.
- Although they may experience increased pleasure, they can become beguiled and enslaved by material things and end up intensifying suffering.

People with insight into the nature of conditioned phenomena, on the other hand, maintain balance. They know the source of genuine happiness. Even if they are deprived of external objects that intensify pleasure, they abide content and happy. Their happiness is internal and independent.

These people comprehend the true meaning of life and the gist of happiness. Happiness makes up the core of their being. If they experience additional forms of pleasure, either by complying with natural laws or by enjoying various

gadgets and devices, they see these as simply enhancing their inherent happiness.

People who do not have this insight and who are not inherently happy while being alone must entrust their happiness to external things. At first their happiness is dependent on finding gratifying objects outside in their environment. They become captive to these things. Later, they may acquire tools and devices created through human ingenuity to increase their pleasure. Yet this only expands their servitude to external things. Acquiring more pleasant objects not only increases their pleasure; it also ends up increasing their misery.

Here we come to the question of happiness. There are two kinds of happiness:

1. Happiness dependent on external things. This includes both material objects and other people. If these things are absent, one feels deprived and unhappy. This is a fickle, unstable form of happiness. It is a veneer of happiness. Such dependence on external things is quite common among human beings.

2. Inherent, independent happiness. Even if one abides alone, without external gratifying objects, one is happy. This happiness and satisfaction springs from within and is connected with self-mastery. This form of happiness is more difficult to find in the world.

Often people have no inkling of their dependence on external things. It does not occur to them that everyone needs time alone. External things will eventually abandon us. Even if we possess them, they are unable to constantly gratify our desires. If we expect them to satisfy us, we will invariably be

disappointed and end up suffering. This is because all things are subject to the natural law of conditionality.

When we demand that phenomena fall in line with our desires, we are prone to disappointment. This is because the causes and conditions supporting these things often propel them in a different direction, giving rise to conflict and discord. Our desires want things to go in one direction, but their causes and conditions lead them elsewhere. Who wins? The law of nature wins – the law of conditionality. Suffering defeat, we feel oppressed – we experience dukkha. This is normal. The two tides clash.

Buddhism gives this subject of happiness great emphasis. The teachings urge us to comprehend various laws of nature and to establish a correct attitude towards them. We should reflect: 'I won't set my desires as the benchmark for my well-being; instead, I will give priority to understanding the law of conditionality. Things proceed according to causes and conditions. They do not bow to my desires. If I want something to proceed in a specific way, I must examine and understand the relevant factors; having done this I will focus on them in order to bring about the desired result.' In sum, we should not sit around idly waiting for things to pander to our desires, for this is futile.

Such knowledge and understanding brings about freedom of mind. Personal desires will no longer be a cause for agitation and distress. These teachings by the Buddha foster acceptance and wise reflection. When confronted by various situations, we say to ourselves: 'Look at the causes and conditions; things proceed in harmony with their causal factors.' These very reflections can immediately dispel all negativity in the mind.

When faced with separation of a loved one, if people respond from personal desire, they exclaim: 'Oh! How I loved this person. Why have they left me? I wish they could have lived for another ten years!' The more they mull over this event, the sadder they become. This is giving priority to desire. Expecting things to fall in line with desire leads to suffering.

If people respond with wisdom, however, they will say: 'Well, all things proceed according to causes and conditions. These human bodies are compounded organisms. They follow the law of conditionality. If the necessary causes for birth are present, the body is born; if the causes for sustainability are present, it is sustained; if the causes for dissolution are present, it passes away.' Such reflections bring about healthy detachment, inner freedom, and self-reliance. With this increased freedom, the mind abides happily and at ease.

The essential factor here is to gain an insight into arising and ceasing. When we see the arising and ceasing in all things, including our own lives, we recognize that this conditioned dynamic is part of nature. We then respond to situations with wisdom by focusing on the necessary causes and conditions. Besides bringing about success in our work and other enterprises, wisdom brings about a constant state of inner radiance, purity, and joy.

Protecting Inner Wealth in the Face of Life's Vicissitudes

The first step of the Buddhist path is to understand laws of nature. The second step is to enable this understanding to bring about wholesome qualities in the mind such as joy, radiance,

composure, and peace.

If we get caught up in such thoughts as: 'I want things to proceed in a certain way, but they never seem to work out as desired,' we will struggle with agitation and confusion.

But if we shine the light of wisdom, we will feel light and at ease, free of trouble and vexation. We will realize genuine happiness.

For those who aspire to a virtuous life, the Buddhist teachings advise to generate the following five wholesome states of mind:

1. Having cultivated an understanding of truth, we are encouraged to foster and sustain joy (*pāmojja*)[33] in the mind.

2. Joy leads to delight (*pīti*).[34] Even if we are faced with unpleasant or undesirable situations, if we are grounded in wisdom, we can maintain delight and contentment.

3. When delight is established, the mind is relaxed and at ease; tranquillity (*passaddhi*)[35] arises.

4. A relaxed and tranquil mind is spacious and refreshed; happiness (*sukha*) arises.

5. With happiness, the mind is stable and firm, calm and lucid; it does not squirm or vacillate. Nothing disturbs it. Concentration (*samādhi*)[36] arises.

The Buddhist teachings urge us to cultivate these five wholesome qualities and to see them as treasures in the mind.

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[33] 'Gladness'.
[34] Also translated as 'bliss'.
[35] Such tranquillity and relaxation also permeates the body.
[36] Mental stability, steadfastness, and balance.

They should be protected and strengthened, to the point that no one can damage or undermine them.

These spiritual treasures are superior to external riches. We acquire material wealth to provide us with pleasure. But it is uncertain whether external things can truly make us happy. Sometimes they only provide fleeting forms of happiness.

Through a closer inspection, we will recognize that, in fact, it is precisely these wholesome states of mind that are the most satisfactory outcome of acquiring material wealth. Yet for many people, after they acquire increased material wealth, there is not a reciprocal increase of wholesome mind states. Often wealth obstructs or impairs these mind states. Before acquiring material possessions, people live in a state of anticipation and hope. After acquiring them, their state of mind may deteriorate, due to such qualities as attachment, possessiveness, suspicion, envy, avarice, and so on.

Conversely, if we are able to establish and sustain joy, delight, tranquillity, happiness, and concentration without relying on external things, we will have accomplished the greatest of skills. We will recognize: 'Oh! No outside wealth compares in value with these wholesome states of mind.' This is because, ultimately, it is precisely these mind states that we have always been looking for. They are the authentic treasures and true wealth. Possessing these virtues brings about lasting, genuine satisfaction and wellbeing.

At the end of the day, we may find ourselves lying on a hospital bed. Our material possessions, and even our relatives, cannot save us. Food loses its appeal. Sometimes we may not even be able to move. The only thing we can rely on is our own

heart and mind. If we have lived our lives completely dependent on external objects, and we have entrusted our happiness to them, then only one outcome is likely: misery and affliction.

Wise people with insight into the laws of nature, endowed with joy, delight, tranquillity, happiness, and concentration, will behave differently. They have gained self-mastery. Although they may lie alone on a hospital bed, with nothing or no one to cure them, they are still able to dwell in contentment.

In this latter case, one possesses an inherent, indwelling happiness. At times of good health, when additional forms of pleasure are available, one has access to two kinds of happiness. And in times of solitude, when alone and deprived of external pleasures, or in poor health, one is still able to sustain joy and happiness. At the very least, one is not overly disturbed by anxiety and affliction.

As Buddhists, we can thus see clearly what is essential in life. Although we can manufacture various material objects to increase comfort and pleasure, the highest form of happiness dwells within us, and it must be cultivated through spiritual practice. We can foster these five wholesome states of mind by making them ingrained characteristics, supported by wisdom. They become our refuge. We should treasure and strengthen them, so that nothing can undermine them.

When we encounter other people, it is normal to have emotional responses. Sometimes, these emotions cause agitation or mental conflict. For instance, we may be listening to someone speak, and unwittingly disagreeable emotions arise. In such a case, we fail to protect our inner treasures; we allow emotions to undermine us. Our inner joy, for example, vanishes.

We may observe someone doing something and before we know it negativity arises. We become sullen, dejected, and distressed. Responding in this way is allowing someone else to ruin our inner treasures; we have failed to protect them. As a countermeasure, we should establish mindfulness, reminding ourselves to protect these five qualities. At the very least, we recognize their supreme value and determine to keep them intact. If we can do this, we will grow and prosper in the Dhamma.

By nurturing and sustaining the five wholesome states of mind – joy, delight, tranquillity, happiness, and concentration – we follow in the footsteps of the Buddha – the One Who Knows, the Awakened One, the Joyous One.

The best way to generate these five inner treasures is to comprehend truth.[37] By doing this we will taste the purest of all flavours, similar to drinking pristine water, and we will experience genuine happiness and wellbeing.

Today, I have given a talk on the theme of understanding the truth of all things and using this understanding as a basis to make the mind radiant, pure, and joyous, endowed with virtuous qualities. Ultimately, there is no greater achievement in life.

With such understanding, we realize that, although we create things in the world to provide comfort and happiness, if we are still dependent on external objects – if we still entrust our happiness to them – we are not truly free. We recognize the vital importance of training the mind and developing wisdom in order to gain self-mastery.

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[37] *Sacca-dhamma.*

Today, friends and relatives have gathered to conduct a merit-making ceremony in memory of the departed.

On one level, by recollecting your good deeds and expressions of kindness and gratitude, you will experience joy and ease of mind, thus alleviating sadness and grief.

On another level, by contemplating and comprehending laws of nature, you will generate the five wholesome states of mind, thus bringing about true freedom of mind and dispelling all grief and sorrow.

These two factors of performing good deeds and cultivating wise discernment both fall under the category of 'merit' (*puñña*) and 'wholesomeness' (*kusala*). Having acted in this way, one realizes the significance of the Buddha's exhortations to his disciples to practise mindfulness of death: to reflect on death with wisdom, free from sorrow and fear. Such reflections bring about vigilance, perseverance, and a comprehensive understanding of life.

Another benefit to purifying and brightening your minds in this way is that your dedications of goodness to the departed will become more fruitful.

The teachings state that effective dedication of goodness requires focused concentration and clear intention. If the mind is clouded and perturbed by sorrow and distress, it lacks stability and resolve. It is not one-pointed and potent.

Therefore, we should make our minds steady, tranquil, and bright. We do this by recollecting our virtuous deeds and by gaining insight into the truth. When the mind is primed in this way, one is ready to dedicate any goodness one has accrued to the deceased.

I rejoice in the goodness performed on this occasion by the hosts of today's ceremony, along with relatives and friends. You have come to express your kind wishes to the departed and to observe the last rites. Indeed, this is a way of honouring both the departed and those who are still alive. All of you have come with wholesome intent. May you find delight in having performed these virtuous deeds.

When your minds are pure and bright, unburdened by sorrow, dedicate the goodness you have accumulated to your relative and friend, the deceased. May they acknowledge and rejoice in this goodness, and may they experience happiness and fulfilment in their next life.

4. Aging and Dying[38]

Today I have been invited to speak on death and dying. Instead, however, I would like to speak on aging and dying.

Old age and death are natural phenomena. It is in accordance with the law of nature that all conditioned things are impermanent and liable to change – subject to causes and conditions. Everything that has a beginning must ultimately come to an end. All beings, having been born, must fall into decline and die. Aging is just the ebbing away of life and the decay of the faculties. And death is the termination of life, the breaking up of the aggregates, and the casting off of the body.

Although, in terms of nature, aging and death are simple facts of life, psychologically, they often give rise to a loss of hope, thwarted ambition, a sense of leaping into darkness, and an accompanying feeling of fear and anguish.

In spite of the degeneration and loss inherent in aging and dying, however, old age can be turned into an opportunity for spiritual development, and death into an opportunity for sublime realization. One should live a good and worthwhile life during one's waning years. One can thus die an unconfused or even an enlightened death.

The human lifespan is traditionally divided into three stages: beginning, middle, and end. Giving attention to what is good and righteous, one should live a virtuous life through

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[38] Trans: a talk given in English by Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacariya in Pattaya, April 22, 1996. I have edited this talk; it is not a verbatim transcription. At the time of giving this talk, the venerable author's ecclesiastical title was Tahn Chao Khun Dhammapitaka.

all three stages. If through negligence, however, a person fails to live a good life in the first and middle stages, there is still time left in the final one, that is, in old age.

The Buddha was able to maintain his perfect lucid wisdom not only as a young, black-haired man in the prime of youth, but also during his old age.[39] This means that it is possible to have a happy and fruitful life in old age. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, one can make progress in goodness and attain to perfection even at this last stage of life.

Many people spend their entire early and middle years in search of fame and fortune, seeking wealth and power, and pursuing material pleasures. They might claim that their lives have been worthwhile. But in truth, this is not so; it is not enough. They have not obtained the best for their lives. They have not realized their full human potential. In some ways, the elderly have an advantage over other people, because they can now focus on making advances towards fulfilling their potential.

What is this human potential? It could be described in many ways, but some examples would be the various kinds of inner and independent happiness obtained through spiritual development. In short, there are many virtues that people in search of wealth, power, and pleasure will never experience unless they survive to develop them in their old age.

As reaching old age is an advantage if one learns how to utilize it, we should look after ourselves well so that we live long. This requires care, whereby we nurture and safeguard various dimensions of our lives: our minds and bodies, our

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[39] M. I. 82-83.

emotions, our behaviour, and our intellect and intuition. The interdependence and interrelationship among these facets of life should be carefully considered, so that they support one another.

Looking after our bodies should not be thought of as separate from developing a healthy relationship to our social and natural environment. In addition to getting sufficient food and physical exercise, correct attitudes, behaviour, and habits should be developed in connection to eating, consumption of material resources, and recreation.

As is clearly evident, present-day society is bound up with a highly competitive and consumerist system, whereby people experience a state of time-scarcity because of competitive individualism and the personal pursuit of material pleasure. In such a society, people find it difficult to take care of others and, therefore, elderly people must be more self-reliant. In such a situation, they should devote themselves more to an intimate relationship with the natural environment – to enjoying activities in nature.

In terms of personal relationships, it is normal for parents and grandparents to be actively concerned for their children's and grandchildren's wellbeing. However, when children have grown up and can take care of themselves, they should take personal responsibility. At this point, an excessive concern by parents and grandparents often leads to vexation and bother for both parties. This is not conducive to the mental health of either.

There is a principle in the Buddha's teachings that when children grow up and are able to take responsibility for their own lives, parents are advised to develop equanimity. This

means that love must be balanced by equanimity. In other words, love tied up with attachment, whether to persons or things, must be replaced by love accompanied by equanimity. The ideal form of love can be accurately expressed as loving-kindness or friendliness.[40]

In terms of the mind, we should refine our emotions and strengthen our determination. In respect to the elderly, they should develop the will to remain active. They should have an activity that they value highly and have a loving interest in, something they strongly want to do, for example, writing a book about their important experiences, carrying out a gardening project, or searching for knowledge on a spiritual matter. Let their will to act be so strong as to make them declare: 'I cannot die before I have accomplished this activity.'

Many of us can think of elderly people, especially retirees, who, not long after retirement, became lonely and dejected, downhearted and gloomy. They quickly wither away and die. Some old people suffer from depression and even commit suicide. But this is not the case for the elderly who develop a strong will. Their willpower and stalwart spirit only gets stronger. They have an activity to commit themselves to. And accompanying this activity, they apply reasoning and investigation. They become strong and healthy, both in mind and body. The Buddha said that a person endowed with the four qualities of the desire to act, strong willpower, commitment, and a spirit of investigation,[41] can live out a long and full life. [42]

Now we come to the juncture between the heart and the

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[40] Trans.: in Greek philosophy, this kind of love is called *philia*.
[41] Trans.: *chanda*, *viriya*, *citta*, and *vimaṁsā*, respectively.
[42] In the Buddhist scriptures, a full human lifespan is determined as 100 years.

mind, where emotions are strengthened and refined by one's intellectual faculty. Before expanding on this subject, however, I would like to mention another two points.

First, elderly people are usually physically frail and easily prone to disease. This tends to make them worried and crestfallen. In this context, they are encouraged by the Buddha to train themselves thus: 'Although my body is sick, may my mind not be sick,' or, 'Even though my body grows weak, may my mind not grow weak.'

The second point pertains to happiness. Many people think of happiness in terms of sensual or material pleasure. Yet if happiness consists merely of satisfying the senses, life at old age will be a great torment, forever deprived of happiness, because aging implies, among other things, the degeneration and decay of the sense faculties.

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of happiness. The first is sensual pleasure dependent on external things. As this kind of happiness is dependent on material objects, those who are devoted to its enjoyment become pleasure seekers. In the pursuit of this kind of happiness, pleasure seekers train themselves and spend a lot energy developing the ability to perceive and identify things for gratifying the senses. For many of these individuals, this process of enhancing sense gratification is interpreted, often unconsciously, as the true of meaning of learning or education.

Human beings possess a gift for creativity – one aspect of the human potential. The capacity for creative thinking has produced numerous inventions and advances in technology. Directed inwardly, such creative reasoning can help to foster happiness and various kinds of skilful mental qualities.

Unfortunately, pleasure seekers, being engrossed in the search for external objects to gratify their senses, fail to develop this potential for inner creativity. The creative or formative potential left undeveloped sows the seeds for an inner lack of happiness and various negative mental states. While seeking external happiness through the gratification of the senses, they create or form inside themselves various kinds of negative mind states, for instance stress, anxiety, depression, fear, and insomnia, and sometimes more serious mental disorders.

In the end, pleasure seekers in their old age suffer double anguish. Externally, because of the degeneration of their sense faculties, they experience the frustration of reduced sensual happiness. Internally, they are subject to the arising and formation of unskilful feelings such as fear, anxiety, stress, and depression. And the frustration of limited external happiness intensifies these negative emotions even more. This is a very unhappy life in old age.

Wise people not only develop the ability to seek external objects to satisfy sensual desires, but they also develop the potential for creativity, generating in themselves various positive mental qualities and an inner happiness. The Buddha advised us to develop five skilful qualities as constant factors of the mind, namely: joy, delight, tranquillity, happiness, and concentration. These five qualities ward off negative emotions and unhappiness. Here, a person develops the ability to generate happiness – to be happy. This second kind of happiness is an internal mental quality independent of external material objects. A person who has developed it becomes, in contrast with a seeker of pleasure, one endowed with

inherent happiness. The elderly should learn to develop this inner happiness to a greater extent, so that they may enjoy lives of peace, freedom, and true contentment.

There is still a higher level of happiness. It is happiness beyond all conditioned formations. This is the highest form of happiness, to be realized through liberating wisdom or insight into the true nature of things.

On the path to liberating the mind through wisdom, we are advised by the Buddha to discover freedom and to learn the truth of things at every step along the way. Aging and death are among the facts of life that should be constantly reviewed. In the words of the Buddha:

'These five facts of life should be repeatedly contemplated by everyone, whether female or male, whether layman or monastic:

1) I am subject to old age; I have not gone beyond aging.

2) I am subject to disease; I have not gone beyond illness.

3) I am subject to death; I have not gone beyond dying.

4) There will be separation from all that is dear and beloved to me.

5) I am the owner of my actions; whatever actions I shall do, for good or for ill, of that I will be the heir.'

Death, in particular, which is the central point or the culmination of these facts of life, is a special focus of contemplation. Buddhists are advised to practise mindfulness or contemplation of death (*maraṇassati*). This contemplation is far different from imagination or fanciful thinking – known as unwise attention – which often leads to fear, sorrow, and

dejection. Correct and wise contemplation of death leads to the acceptance of the impermanence of life. Furthermore, it leads to a life of diligence and earnestness, whereby one strives to get the best of life before it comes to an end. Finally, it leads to realizing the truth of the impermanence of all things. The insight into the true nature of all things brings about wisdom that liberates the mind. The mind of the wise, being freed, is balanced and established in equanimity. Such realized individuals enjoy the highest happiness.

Some of the Buddha's disciples attained enlightenment and final freedom even at the moment of death. For those who have not realized the final goal of perfect freedom, at the moment of death they are taught how to die unconfused and with a clear and peaceful mind.

In sum, three points should be observed concerning aging and death:

1. Aging and death are simple facts of life. Recognizing and contemplating them leads to an insight into the truth of all things.
2. Encountering aging and death provides an opportunity for cultivating a good life. We should thus derive the highest benefit from these truths.
3. True insight into aging and death leads to the realization of the highest happiness: the ageless and deathless state.

With these remarks, I bring my talk to a close. Thank you.

5. A Teaching for Relatives of the Sick[43]

On behalf of the monastic community, I wish to express my appreciation for being invited to this merit-making event dedicated to your sick father. This occasion shows that you are keeping him in your hearts with thoughts of love and affection, wishing him to recover from his illness.

As Buddhists, an essential support for us is to perform wholesome actions and to remain intimately connected to the Triple Gem: to rely on the power of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha – to rely on the power of goodness – as a healing and protective force.

In such times of sickness, our state of mind is critical. This includes both the mind of the patient, and the minds of concerned family members and friends.

The treatment of illness is twofold: we must treat both the body and the mind. The purely physical illness is just one part of the equation. When the body falls sick, the mind tends to also become unwell, growing unsteady and out of sorts. Because it is normal for the body to feel pain and to become frail, the Buddha exhorted us to make the determination: 'Although my body is sick, may my mind not be sick.' In this way, we shall retain, at least in one aspect of our lives, strength and fortitude. Moreover, by sustaining such a reflection, the mind can help in curing the body.

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[43] Trans: an excerpt from the book คติธรรมแห่งชีวิต (*Dhamma Lessons for Living a Good Life*). This talk was given to the relatives of Khun Yin Candrasakul at Siriraj Hospital on Sunday 27 December 1988. For a complete version of this talk, see: *Healthy Body – Happy Mind* (chapter 2), © 2020.

If the mind falls ill alongside the body, the pain or disease becomes intensified and exacerbated. But if the illness remains only on the physical level, the mind can help to fortify the body. Strength of mind promotes physical health.

The sick are in great need of support. If they cannot muster inner comfort and resolve, they must rely on support from others, in particular from friends and relatives. For this reason, the Buddhist teachings urge those most intimate with the sick to offer them encouragement and reassurance.

Friends and relatives feel a natural care and concern for their loved ones. As a consequence, they themselves may begin to suffer and feel distressed. In such cases, their ability to offer support is compromised. It is thus vital for them to discover means for maintaining ease and strength of mind.

Our own mental fortitude is crucial for nurturing the mental strength of those who are sick. Under such circumstances, our mental bearing is of great importance.

The primary responsibility of doctors is to provide medical treatment in order to cure people's illnesses. In contrast, the responsibility of friends and relatives is more emotional and spiritual. Besides providing general care and comfort to patients, we should also engage in protecting and strengthening the mind – both our own minds and those of our loved ones.

In respect to our own minds, we should remain calm and relaxed. At the very least, we can rest assured that we have not neglected our loved ones in their time of ill health; we have cared for them to the utmost. We can take comfort in the fact that we have fulfilled at least this one important responsibility to the best of our ability. Our inner ease

generates mental steadfastness, which in itself provides patients with encouragement and strength, whether they are conscious of the process or not.

In terms of illness, many aspects of the human mind remain mysterious. Sometimes, people's normal channels of perception may be impaired, but they still retain a level of recognition and understanding. This is true even for those in a coma: on some level, they still dream and have subtle modes of feeling and awareness arising by way of the sense faculties and nervous system, or even through a form of psychic communication. They can therefore pick up on the joy and comfort from others and feel encouraged. At the very least, they experience less anxiety.

Peace of mind, joy, and inner ease are thus of great benefit, both to caregivers and to the sick.

These matters of the heart are vital. The fact that you have gathered today to look after your beloved relative – even taking time off from work – is due to your love and concern for him. Yet, occasionally, this very love and concern may cause agitation. It can thus happen that good qualities give rise to suffering. You may have heard monks say: 'Love causes suffering.' What this means is that love, when tied up with attachment, can easily lead to inner conflict.

The trick is to love without causing suffering. If we can nurture a pure kind of love, we will reap only positive fruits. We will remain happy. Such pure love creates a healthy sense of care and connection between people. Our minds will be clear and tranquil, ready to provide others with assistance.

We should engage in introspection and ask ourselves

whether we have fulfilled our responsibilities towards others. If we have done so, then we already arrive at one level of peace of mind.

The next step is to acknowledge that getting caught up in worry and grief does nothing to assist our ailing loved ones. Only inner morale, strength of heart, and calm help in these cases.

Mental calm is also the foundation for clear and agile thinking. If we are agitated, either mentally or physically, our thoughts will be laboured and lack fluency. This will then adversely affect all our actions. To sum up, peace, fortitude, and joy are all required for reaching success in our endeavours.

A basic principle is that goodness should lead to greater goodness. The love you feel for your father is a form of goodness; it is a virtue. Allow this love to generate joy, and then apply these wholesome qualities to reflect on how best to manage this situation: how to look after him and how to nurture your own inner resources that support his sense of wellbeing.

Imagine that your father is aware of your presence today and senses your love and concern. With this awareness, he will feel glad and encouraged. If you yourselves can maintain an inner sense of ease, his peace of mind will be increased and his worries alleviated, facilitating his physical healing.

Apart from applying wise reflection to bring about strength of mind, we can also be supported by the power of the Triple Gem. We should remember that we do not exist alone and in isolation: we are all nourished by goodness. All of you – family and friends – have come today with love and respect, making

merit on behalf of the patient. May the blessings of these good deeds strengthen his morale. Let us keep him in our hearts and prayers. And may this collective goodness protect him.

In Buddhist merit-making ceremonies, we honour the Triple Gem: the most profound spiritual refuge. When we fully comprehend the meaning of the Triple Gem, and surrender to it, our hearts become resolute, peaceful, and composed. May all of you, including your father, be surrounded by an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity, and may this lead to his recovery and return to good health, both in body and in mind.

I wish to express my appreciation to all of you for organizing this auspicious event of making offerings to the sangha. I am confident that your good deeds will generate wholesome states of mind: clarity, contentment, peace, and joy. May these wholesome states bring about blessings of rejuvenation, good health, and happiness.

To finish, we will chant a blessing. Compose your minds to foster a peaceful atmosphere and send thoughts of well-wishing to your father. May he acknowledge and rejoice in these good deeds.

6. Balance: the Essence of Health and Fulfilment[44]

Maintaining Mental Balance in the Face of Death

I have heard doctors use the expression 'balanced health care'. The first step to realizing such balanced health care is to treat the body, to attend to the specific physical illnesses that plague a patient. Yet this concept also implies a mental balance, including the attitude a doctor holds in relation to the patient: to show kindness, to give encouragement, and to offer treatment with compassion and respect.

Initially, patients should establish confidence in the doctors and nurses, entrusting the treatment and cure of medical disorders to their expertise. Yet it is up to the patients themselves to establish mental balance by drawing upon Dhamma – upon principles of truth. They thus maintain balance and a sense of ease by applying the Dhamma as a medicine.

The Buddhist teachings urge us to profit from all of life's circumstances. We should learn to derive some form of benefit from everything we encounter. A person considered truly proficient and wise is able to take advantage even of the greatest misfortune. As I have mentioned before, a person at death's doorstep, in the most dire straits, can still use this situation to realize arahantship.

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[44] Trans: an excerpt from the book คติธรรมแห่งชีวิต (*Dhamma Lessons for Living a Good Life*). This talk was given at Ban Suan Hospital on 29 December 1991.

Buddhism teaches that death – normally considered so unfortunate, frightening, and repulsive – can offer extremely valuable lessons. The Buddha encouraged us to develop mindfulness of death,[45] to reflect on death in such a way that our minds are made bright and joyous.

Those people unskilled or inexperienced at such reflections are usually cowed and terrified by death. Some people cannot tolerate the very idea of death. They do everything in their power to flee from any mention of it. If someone else brings it up for discussion, they want to push this person away or block their ears.

Someone who is spiritually well-trained, on the other hand, is completely at ease. Even if such a person thinks of death all the time, their complexion will be cheerful and radiant. This is possible. Some people realize complete liberation through reflecting on death. Consequently, they are in a constant state of joy and peace. Through their understanding, delight, and awakening, they have become a 'Buddha'.

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[45] *Maraṇassati.*

7. From Bane to Ultimate Gain[46]

Every moment and every stage of life provides us with an opportunity to learn and to grow. Even at the final stage, in preparation for death, we have the opportunity to realize the supreme benefit – to bring about the ultimate blessing and fulfilment in our lives.

Some older people harbour regrets, thinking that their lives have been worthless. They believe they have not truly accomplished anything of value or they feel that they have only met with failure. Never mind. Such thoughts can be seen as constructive if we are able to simply let them go and to start afresh. If we focus on the time remaining to us and make an effort to make necessary adaptations and improvements, even during the twilight of our lives – or during our final days – we have the opportunity to achieve the ultimate good.

On a profound level, life is simply a succession of fleeting moments – a time continuum that is shaped and transformed. Spiritual training culminating in lucid, all-pervading wisdom is able in an instant to transform the mind – the essential element of human life – from dark to light, from anguished to contented. Everyone has this chance, even at the last breath.

It is even possible to redeem one's mistakes at the eleventh hour. At the time of the Buddha, some of his disciples were in such physical pain that they opted to commit suicide. One of these disciples had a severe illness and was in tremendous

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[46] Trans: an excerpt from the book ถ้าสูงอายุเป็น ก็น่าเป็นผู้สูงอายุ (*If One Is Skilled at Aging, One is Worthy of Being an Elder*).

pain, which resulted in him falling away from elevated states of concentration that he had previously attained. He became so discouraged that he decided to kill himself by taking his razor and slitting his own throat. While engaged in this act, his mind was muddled and confused. He thus committed this harmful deed.

Just moments before he died, however, due to his extensive spiritual training, he reestablished mindfulness and became grounded in wise discernment, to the extent of realizing complete enlightenment. He turned the tables at the last moment, transforming despair into liberation of the heart.

Other gravely ill disciples, at their final moments before death, similarly underwent a transformation due to their accumulated wisdom. Shortly before departing this world, their minds were filled with light and happiness, realizing the supreme state – Nibbāna.

These awakened individuals are superior to ordinary people who die having experienced mundane forms of success, for example great riches, exalted fame, or immense power. These latter forms of success are referred to as a 'visible, everyday gain'.[47] Awakened people's boon exceeds even the happiness of the celestial beings – the devas and Brahmas – which is referred to as an 'ethereal, refined welfare'.[48] The wellbeing and happiness of awakening, however, is the 'supreme benefit'.[49]

In sum, we still have hope, up to our final breath.

Most elderly people still have years to live and thus have

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[47] *Diṭṭhadhammikattha.*
[48] *Samparāyikattha.*
[49] *Paramattha.*

considerable opportunity to grow and learn. They can dedicate the remaining years to being the golden age – the finest years of their life. In particular, it is a time of generating spiritual assets, by gathering knowledge, training the mind, and cultivating wisdom.

From a positive perspective, old age frees us from the hassles of pandering to bodily pleasures. Normally, our social duties are reduced and we have laid down the burden of earning a living. There is more time to devote to learning and spiritual cultivation. If we are able to open up space in our lives, to spend time contemplating truth and honing wisdom, we still have a real opportunity to realize the supreme benefit.

8. Discourse on Death[50]

The young and the old, the foolish and the wise,

The wealthy and the poor, all are destined for death.

Just as a potter's vessels, both small and large, both fired and unfired, end up shattered, so too the lives of all beings end in death.

Ripe I am in years. Only a little of my life remains. Now I depart from you; I have made myself my own refuge.

Monks, be vigilant, mindful and of pure virtue; compose your thoughts, and guard your mind.

In this Doctrine and Discipline, a person who abides diligently escapes the round of rebirth and makes an end of misery.[51]

A Life Free from Delusion

Today I will give a Dhamma talk on the theme of living a precious life free from delusion. This occasion is an opportunity to cultivate goodness by listening to the Dhamma.[52] We are gathered to participate in a discussion chaired by Khun Sulak Sivaraksa, and also to observe the 7-day memorial service for Khun Komol Keem-Thong,[53] who was a disciple and friend of

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[50] Thai title: มรณกถา.

[51] The Buddha's words at: D. II. 120-21.

[52] *Dhammassavana-maya.*

[53] Trans.: Khun Komol Keem-Thong was a well-known teacher and educator. On 22 February 1971, in Surat Thani province, he was shot by communists, who falsely suspected him of being a government spy.

mine. He was recently killed while engaging in wholesome service to his community. Today's events can thus be seen as expressions of friendship[54] and sympathy[55] for someone worthy of honour and respect.

Khun Komol was a kind and virtuous man who lived a praiseworthy life. The work he did during his life is a testament to his aspirations and endeavours for promoting the progress and development of society. For instance, he was a driving force behind such seminars as the one we are participating in today. And when studying as an undergraduate in the Faculty of Education at Chulalongkorn University, he was involved in numerous projects, such as designing commemorative books for his department.

After graduation, he took further interest in public service. For example, he helped organize conferences on education and was entrusted with producing a book on analyzing social problems. And vitally – a matter which was to ultimately play a role in his tragic death – he sacrificed the comforts and personal gains available in the prosperous capital of Bangkok to teach children in the remote mountain village of Muang Huay in Ban Long District, Surat Thani Province. He dedicated himself to teaching and increasing his knowledge of Thai culture – supporting his local community as much as he could – until the day of his death.

Khun Komol's life story reveals his character disposition, as being someone with wholesome initiative, high ideals, self-sacrifice, and an earnest commitment to live up to his values.

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[54] *Mitta-bali.*
[55] *Saṅgaha-dhamma.*

It is normal that when someone of such virtue passes away, his family and friends will feel sorrow and loss. This is even more the case when the deceased is still in the prime of youth and actively engaged in doing good. We have not only lost a friend and companion; we have also lost a good person. And his death cut short the wholesome deeds he most likely would have performed were he still alive.

From the perspective of Dhamma, solely mourning over the passing of a loved one is neither advantageous to the living nor to the deceased. Mourning and lamentation cannot bring the lost one back from the dead. And if not carefully checked, it can cause damage for those who survive, by overshadowing the mind and stifling wisdom. Recollecting the dead is only useful when accompanied by skilful reflection, which gives rise to heedfulness and a motivation to perform virtuous deeds, thus protecting and continuing the wholesome legacy of the deceased.

According to the truth of nature, all human life ends with death. Death is an inevitable result for everyone: high or low, rich or poor, intelligent or foolish, good or bad. Having said this, we are unable to determine beyond doubt the time and circumstances of our death. There is no guaranteed way to predict whether a person will live a short or a long life. There is no absolute certainty in this matter.

In any case, living into old age is not a true index for measuring the virtue or value of a person's life. Some people live a long life, but their life is lived in vain. In the Buddhist teachings, this is referred to as an empty or meaningless life.[56]

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[56] *Mogha-jīvita.*

Conversely, some people live only a short while, dying at an age considered premature, yet they perform good deeds and benefit their community. Although their life is short, it does not pass by in vain. They have touched their fellow human beings in a beneficial way, leaving behind the fruits of their good actions. This is called a precious, meaningful life.[57]

The number of years a person lives is not the true benchmark for determining the value of a person's life. It is the goodness and blessings springing from one's life that is the true determining factor.

We should thus examine how people make use of their lives. If they live a virtuous life and spread goodness far and wide, one can say that they have lived a precious life. But if they simply drift along, allowing time to slip away and wasting the opportunity to do good, one can say that they have lived a worthless life. The Buddha pointed to this principle when he said:

'Though one should live a hundred years, immoral and thoughtless, yet better, indeed, it is to live for a single day upright and conscientious.'[58]

Yo ca vassataṃ jīve dussīlo asamāhito

Ekāhaṃ jīvitaṃ seyyo sīlavantassa jhāyino

Similarly:

'Though one should live a hundred years, idle and inactive, yet better, indeed, is a single day's life of one who makes resolute effort.' [59]

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[57] *Amogha-jīvita.*
[58] Dh. verse 110.
[59] Dh. verse 112.

Yo ca vassataṃ jīve kusīto hīnavīriyo

Ekāhaṃ jīvitaṃ seyyo viriyaṃ ārabhato daḷhaṃ

As we cannot determine with any certainty how long or short our lives will be, we should attend carefully to those factors supportive to our lives. We should do this without fear or anxiety. Some people become so worried about the prospect of death that they become more miserable than if they were actually dying.

Our efforts and attention should be focused on how we live our lives, on how we can use our lives to generate and increase wellbeing. By putting forth diligent effort we can witness tangible results and are able to touch the lives of many people. Such effort has entirely positive effects. It does not lead to selfishness or suffering. On the contrary, it leads to clarity and spaciousness of mind, and generates courage and mental fortitude used to perform further good deeds. Moreover, it leads to an indwelling, unfettered happiness. One reaches the stage where one is prepared to die at any moment.

A person endowed with such dignity and conscientious effort, who is prepared to die at any time, can be said to be living well and to have understood the essential meaning of life. Death for such a person is not a cause for misery. Sorrow and grief only arise in those people they leave behind. The survivors experience sadness and regret because they previously received the favours of that individual's life. And these feelings are normal for ordinary people.

By maintaining conscientiousness and integrity, one lives in harmony with righteous principles. One realizes that death is a natural part of life. One considers that if one were not to

die under these circumstances, death would surely arrive at some other time. With the firm conviction that one is following the correct course, one engages in one's activities to the utmost of one's ability. This is how to devote one's life to the Dhamma. The Buddha is a prime example of this. As the Bodhisattva, he laid down his life in pursuit of the knowledge of awakening.[60] There are similar examples of valiant people who have devoted their lives in honour of a righteous ideal.

This is consistent with the Buddhist saying:

'One should relinquish wealth to safeguard one's organs, relinquish one's organs to safeguard one's life, and relinquish one's wealth, organs, and even one's life, for the sake of the Dhamma.'[61]

Dhanaṃ caje aṅgavarassa hetu

Aṅgaṃ caje jīvitaṃ rakkhamāno

Aṅgaṃ dhanaṃ jīvitañcāpi sabbaṃ

Caje naro dhammamanussaranto

From an ordinary perspective, it may seem extremely difficult to put one's life on the line in order to uphold righteous principles. Yet when the mind is developed and mature, this is in fact a natural phenomenon. Moreover, as we can see in everyday life, there are many people in the world who sacrifice their lives for relatively pointless and useless goals.[62] Some people risk their lives propelled by greed, others by anger, while still others by delusion. This is common.

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[60] *Bodhiñāṇa.*
[61] J. V. 499-500.
[62] *Adhamma.*

Since there are many people who sacrifice their lives for foolish and meaningless ends, why should it be so difficult to dedicate one's life to upholding beneficial and reasoned principles?

Today's talk has so far focused on living a meaningful and worthy life. To walk this path requires wisdom. It is the faculty of wisdom that is able to distinguish between what is essential and unessential, valuable and worthless, and beneficial and harmful. In Buddhism, someone who is able to follow this path of wisdom is called a sage: a *paṇḍita*.[63]

The Buddhist definition of a sage is someone who conducts his or her life with wisdom. Such people apply wisdom to distinguish between the essential and the worthless.[64] They rise above the worthless and are grounded wholeheartedly in the essential. Here is the Buddha's definition of a *paṇḍita*:

'When he thinks, a wise person thinks only of his own welfare, the welfare of others ... and the welfare of the whole world. It is in this way that one is a wise person of great wisdom.'[65]

> *Attahitaṃ parahitaṃ ... sabbalokahitameva cintayamāno cinteti evaṃ kho bhikkhu paṇḍito mahāpañño hoti.*

Buddhism defines sagehood in the context of how people conduct their lives, beginning with the act of thinking. The decisive factor here is a person's behaviour, rather than technical or academic knowledge and proficiency.

In Thai, the modern definition of a pundit[66] is one who has

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[63] Trans.: the English word 'pundit' comes from the Hindi *pandit* and Sanskrit/Pali *paṇḍita*.
[64] *Sāra and asāra.*
[65] A. II. 179.
[66] Trans.: 'bundit' (บัณฑิต).

completed higher education and received an academic degree. In respect to the original Buddhist definition of a *paṇḍita*, however, one can say that an academic degree is simply one of many factors indicating a person's maturity. It shows that one has accumulated knowledge, gained skills, and passed through a course of training setting the stage for becoming a pundit. Higher education prepares one to become a wise person.

Only when one applies one's acquired knowledge and skills to bring about the wellbeing of oneself and others is one called a true pundit. Note that this wellbeing must extend to oneself, to others, and to the entire world.

Reviewing the life of Khun Komol, we can see that he was worthy of the title of pundit, in both regards:

First, in terms of worldly honours, he was a Bachelor of Education. He acquired knowledge and honed skills preparing him to become a pundit in a higher sense.

Second, he was a wise person as defined by the Buddhist teachings. He applied his knowledge and proficiency in his daily life, ministering to others and attending to his own spiritual development by cultivating inner virtues and resources. He acted for the welfare of himself, for others, and for the entire world.

Although his life was short, he lived a precious and blameless life. And so his life was not lived in vain. He used the brief time available to him for great benefit. No one need worry about him. Instead, his life is a reminder to those still alive. We should urgently ask ourselves the question: 'Have I lived my life in a truly worthwhile and meaningful way?'

Khun Komol was a member of the new generation. The

goodness he performed is of special significance for his peers. He is a beacon of the younger generation. One can say that, in sacrificing his life, his death reflects the dignity and nobility of younger people in our society.

If members of the younger generation recognize the value of his good deeds, and help to sustain them by acting accordingly, his efforts will be honoured. His death will bear lasting good fruit, and it will be as if he lives on – as if he is immortal.

Indeed, it is the truth – the Dhamma – that is undying and immortal.[67] If people live righteously, in harmony with the Dhamma, they also become immortal. Here, immortality does not manifest as a corporeal body, but rather as a living spirit of truth appearing in the world. It is up to us to sustain this living spirit. For instance, in the case of Khun Komol, if the story of his benevolence, along with his death, instil in people courage and fortitude, and encourage them to perform good deeds, his life will not have passed in vain. In this way, his legacy will live on.

For a person's virtue to live on long into posterity, those people still alive should cherish his or her legacy and keep its spirit alive, which helps to foster and sustain goodness in society. The Buddha said:

'Whatever sacrificial offerings one may make intent on merit in an entire year, all of this is not worth one quarter the value of showing respect to the upright.'

Yaṅkiñci yiṭṭhaṃ va hutaṃ va loke

Saṁvaccharaṃ yajetha puññapekkho

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[67] *Amata*

Sabbaṁpi taṃ na catubhāgameti

Abhivādanā ujugatesu seyyoti [68]

Those of you here today who have organized this 7-day memorial service and performed meritorious deeds have acted with this objective.

In conclusion to this talk, may the power of your accumulated merit and goodness promote the happiness and good fortune of Khun Komol Keem-Thong in his future life.

[68] Dh. verse 108.

9. Helping Others to Die Quickly or Helping Others to Die Well?[69]

I extend my greetings to the deputy director of the Medical Department who is presiding over today's meeting, to the director of the Institute Of Geriatric Medicine, to the fellow monastics, and to all of the faithful lay supporters gathered here.

I must begin with an apology. When I received the invitation for today's talk, I was slightly puzzled by the proposed title, since it contained a newly coined term, one that I was not acquainted with. Perhaps this term has been used in medical circles for a while, but it's new to me. So initially I was slightly confused. Even the monks I live with did not know the definition of this term 'living will'. Yet, after some contemplation, I believe I have grasped its general meaning.

People have actually come and asked about this subject in the past, but at that time no formal term for this concept had yet been coined. Yesterday, when I opened the invitation letter, not only was there this term 'living will', but it was followed by the words 'its ramifications for Buddhism.' So I was doubly perplexed, thinking: 'How does this subject relate to Buddhism?' It was my mistake that I didn't look at this letter more closely before now. As it was this last-minute, I haven't

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[69] A Dhamma talk given at the Institute Of Geriatric Medicine, Department of Medical Services, in the conference room of the Priest Hospital on 21 July 1998. (The original title of this talk was: 'Living Wills and Their Ramifications for Buddhism'.) [The Thai title is ช่วยให้ตายเร็วหรือช่วยให้ตายดี.]

had the chance to look into this subject matter in depth. Due to this lack of clarity, it is possible that today's talk will not address the desired theme in a fully satisfactory manner.

In any case, what is certain is that this subject pertains to death. Or more precisely, it touches upon the threshold between life and death. We are focusing here on the end of life and the way this ending unfolds. In terms of the sick or the dying, we examine how these people deal with the final stages of their lives and how they embrace death. And in terms of other associated people – relatives, doctors, carers, nurses, and so on – we examine their attitudes and behaviour. This is particularly relevant in this day and age, in which there have been great advances in medical treatment. We now possess technology that is able to prolong a person's life. So this issue has become increasingly complex.

Dying a Good Death

In Buddhism, much attention is given to the end of a person's life – to the process of dying. In the scriptures there are repeated inquiries into how to die a good death. The expression frequently used in this context is: *asammūḷho kālaṃ karoti* – 'To die unbewildered.'[70] One is alert, not overcome by death. This principle is given great emphasis. It implies that the process of dying is an essential part of living a good life.

Dying a good death does not mean simply being reborn in a happy destination. It also means that the moment of death is a pivotal juncture, when one should be mindful and unentangled.

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[70] Trans.: e.g.: A. III. 253.

Being unentangled here means that one's mind is not confused, turbid, or despondent. Rather, it is pure, lucid, and bright. Moreover, at the moment of death, the mind should focus or rest on a wholesome subject of attention. It is for this reason that in Thailand we have the tradition of having the dying listen to noble and auspicious words, for instance chants in praise of the Buddha. The principle of 'chanting arahaṁ', for example, is a means of providing someone at death's doorway with an anchor and refuge. Alternatively, the mind may embrace the blessings of the Triple Gem or recollect meritorious deeds that one has previously performed.

As carers, we should speak encouraging and auspicious words, enabling the sick to be at ease and to find a resting place. They can use these words as a meditation object, facilitating peace and calm. As a consequence, they will become more mindful, free of the confusion and anguish that frequently accompanies pain and loss.

Having said this, there is a superior form of dying, whereby one dies with understanding. That is, one has a comprehensive understanding of life, to the point that one completely accepts the truth of death and the truth of impermanence.

It is already exceptional if someone dies embracing what is wholesome and good. But if one also has this comprehensive understanding, the mind will be luminous, spacious, and free, devoid of any grasping or attachment. This is considered the supreme kind of death.

If we acknowledge that such a supreme death is possible, then as friends and relatives, we should ask ourselves what we can do to help facilitate this for the person who is dying.

There is another principle connected to abiding in a state of lucidity, mindfulness, and disentanglement at the moment of death, that is, to being reborn in a favourable realm of existence. In this context, there are a pair of well-known sayings by the Buddha, namely: 'When the mind is defiled, an unhappy destination may be expected,' and: 'When the mind is undefiled, a happy destination may be expected.'[71]

These words by the Buddha reveal the vital importance of making one's mind virtuous and pure at the moment of death. Even for someone who has performed many immoral actions, and whose state of mind is usually tainted and defiled, if, by chance, when they die, their mind grasps hold of something wholesome, then brightness and purity arise in that moment. Instead of going to a bad destination, as his negative actions performed over decades would normally dictate, he goes to a good destination. This is why Buddhism places such value and importance on the state of one's mind at the moment of death.

Given this fact, we should think in terms of how we can facilitate a dignified and noble death for those under our care, rather than too easily embrace such methods as euthanasia.

Even in the Final Moments We Have the Opportunity to Realize the Ultimate Good

Buddhism asserts that people always have the opportunity to grow, right up to the final days of their lives. This holds true

[71] M. I. 36. *Citte saṅkiliṭṭhe duggati pāṭikaṅkhā* and *citte asaṅkiliṭṭhe sugati pāṭikaṅkhā*, respectively.

even if one is ailing and at death's door. Even at the moment of death, we can still realize the supreme blessing of life: the highest realization of truth, Nibbāna. There may be nothing else to obtain in these final moments, but one can still attain the ultimate good. There is even a Pali term – *jīvita-samasīsī* [72] – to refer to those individuals who become enlightened at the final moment before dying.

This extraordinary opportunity is sometimes at odds with the realities of the body. Although the body may be in severe pain, the mind can still be in a positive state. Normally, in order to feel fulfilled we desire both physical and mental wellbeing. Yet, as mentioned above, even if one is in great physical agony, the pain can potentially become the focus of wisdom, leading to deep insight into the truth of life and to knowledge of awakening. Complete enlightenment can thus occur at the final moment before dying.

There are stories in the Tipiṭaka of disciples who experienced tremendous pain as a result of illness. Their pain was certainly no less than the pain that people experience today, for instance the torment of certain kinds of cancer. In ancient times, people did not yet have the medical equipment available today and their forms of painkillers were probably less effective. They most likely had to endure more severe pain. And yet some of these disciples, stricken by these agonizing illnesses, were able to penetrate ultimate truth during the final moments of their lives and attain arahantship. They made complete peace with things as they are. Their minds were delivered from all suffering.

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[72] Trans.: literally 'equal-headed', i.e. one who simultaneously attains an end of craving and of life.

These are important matters to consider when we care for the sick. Such careful consideration is likely to improve the care and assistance we provide.

Besides assisting the sick and dying in cultivating positive mind states by embracing what is good and wholesome, we may also be able to go even further by helping them grow in wisdom.

Wisdom often gets overlooked. In the context of medical care, people seem to focus primarily on helping the patients grab hold of something affirmative and dignified, which is still one form of attachment. Yet if one can rise above this stage, one abides in the spaciousness and radiance of enlightened wisdom.

Some people live in comfort for their entire lives. If they lack clear discernment and relate to things incorrectly, these favourable circumstances can turn around and end up increasing attachment and clinging. Occasionally, people become completely caught up in comfort and pleasure. Yet, at the moment of death, this very attachment is a cause for confusion and distress. So if at the final moments of life one is able to kindle the light of wisdom, liberation is possible.

From an everyday perspective, we may not know what is the best thing to do in these situations. According to Buddhism, however, the birth of wisdom and a profound insight into truth is the highest happiness. If we can reach this stage, we will relate to all things in the world skilfully. The mind will be radiant and boundless.

Reaching this stage is considered by Buddhists to be the highest goal for human beings. If, while living in comfort

and ease, we are unable to realize this state, yet someone who is suffering from a debilitating illness succeeds in doing so, we must acknowledge that they have attained a superior achievement.

A Deficient Understanding of Nature and the Need for Vigilance

Today's medical advances have brought about new complexities and challenges. Although there have been many breakthroughs in science and technology, inherent imbalances in these advances have also generated new problems.

On the one hand, there has been great progress in medical science, such as inventing equipment for prolonging human life. Yet, on the other hand, science in a broader sense has failed to develop adequately alongside in order to give us greater understanding of human life in all its dimensions. Although technology has advanced, our understanding of natural laws – the very laws that science is beginning to discover and unravel – is insufficient to answer such questions as: 'What is the precise nature of human life?', 'What actually happens at death?', 'At what precise moment does a person die?', and so forth. People may make such claims as, 'A person dies with brainstem death,' but their understanding often remains at the level of conjecture. It is not irrevocable, indisputable knowledge.

Scientific answers to these questions tend to be spiritless and clinical. They touch merely upon the physical body, which is only one aspect of human life. When people find themselves

in critical situations, however, the problems converge at and besiege the mind. At this point, modern science has few answers.

According to the Buddhist teachings, death occurs at the final moment of consciousness.[73] This is a matter concerning the mind, which is indiscernible to the naked eye. Most of our contemporary understanding, including scientific knowledge, only spans as far as the material world, in this case the body. We still lack a comprehensive understanding encompassing both the body and mind.

As stated above, science in a wider sense has not been able to keep pace with technological advances. We don't yet have a complete understanding of human life. There is still an imbalance between a comprehensive knowledge of the laws of nature and a relatively sudden influx of instruments and equipment used to manage and manipulate nature itself. And this imbalance causes problems.

For many centuries, human beings have harboured the dream to conquer nature. This is particularly true in today's day and age, influenced in large part by Western civilization, which has been determined to achieve this victory over nature. There has been a prevalent belief that to be masters over nature would be the crowning human achievement. Yet in order to gain mastery over nature, one must understand it completely. In contemporary society, we have made exceptional advances in one area, namely, the field of technology, but our wider understanding of nature is still inadequate. It is thus inevitable that we face these difficulties.

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[73] *Cuticitta.*

Recognizing the problems stemming from the aforementioned imbalance and shortcomings helps us to deal with these circumstances more effectively. We thus act cautiously and vigilantly. One of the definitions of 'heedfulness'[74] is to abstain from making abrupt and premature categorical judgements. We should remain impartial and objective so that we are prepared to make adjustments in our ways of thinking and acting.

People are generally inclined to rush into making judgements about things, while still lacking a clear understanding. Moreover, they tend to cling on to these judgements, using them as criteria for future evaluations, without seeking the truth about the actual state of affairs.

Acting vigilantly in regard to medical or hospice care is a twofold process. To begin with, we simply accept that for now we will continue to act in a prescribed way (even if it is based on incomplete knowledge). But we remain openminded and objective, so that we can make adjustments and improvements in the future. This requires a readiness to study and to increase our knowledge. As a result, our own methods of practice, and those of the next generation, will be improved.

This same objectivity is required when enacting laws and regulations on these issues. Sometimes we cannot wait; we are required to establish social legislation. But we can acknowledge that our understanding of the various factors involved is still incomplete. For now, we determine to simply do our best.

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[74] *Appamāda.*

An Insight into Nature and the Fulfilment of Human Desire

With these kinds of medical issues it is fair to say that we have no definitive blueprint for action. All we can do is draw upon certain principles and try to apply them to specific circumstances. It requires intelligence and wisdom to know which principles are relevant to individual cases.

According to Buddhism, we should distinguish between two factors:

- Knowledge of laws inherent in nature.
- Fulfilling human needs and desires. When we recognize the aforementioned laws – when aspects of truth become manifest to us – we decide how to respond accordingly.

In this context, relevant laws include: the dynamics of human life, the purpose of human life, the precise moment that death occurs, and so forth. If our knowledge of these laws is proven and certain, then it is clear how to proceed. But frequently, our knowledge is imprecise and inconclusive.

If our knowledge of these laws is limited, making decisions on how to act is difficult. We are then faced with a dilemma: if an action and response is required, and our knowledge is incomplete, how exactly should we go about dealing with these issues?

Another word for knowledge here is wisdom. Wisdom is a vital quality distinguishing human beings from other sentient creatures. And this wisdom can be developed and even perfected, to the extent that we realize enlightenment – we become fully awakened to the truth.

The second factor, of making decisions, pertains to another quality of the mind, namely intention.[75]

The fulfilment of human desires hinges upon a correspondence between understanding natural laws and attending to desire. This has been a perennial challenge for human beings. When we gain deep insight into a natural law, we can act with ease and confidence. This very understanding is accompanied by an awareness that natural laws operate independently from human desire. For this reason it is important to make the distinction between the two factors mentioned above.

The autonomy of natural laws also includes an independence from human laws and regulations. People may set down all sorts of laws and injunctions, but if their understanding of nature is deficient, their actions will not be truly effective and problems will inevitably ensue.

People should thus prioritize studying laws of nature in order to gain insight. Having acquired knowledge, they can then move onto the next step, which is to act accordingly. These two stages should be coordinated. Even if one's understanding of certain laws is yet incomplete, one can act based upon a limited degree of understanding that one possesses at that moment.

Concerning this matter of death and dying, there are specific human desires and wishes that must be taken into consideration. Take the example of someone sick and in a lot of pain, who wants to die. He may ask someone else to assist in taking his life. Even under these circumstances, if we agree to this request, we are not free from blame. Although we may

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[75] *Cetanā.*

justify our actions, saying that we have acted mercifully and even done a good deed, the action still constitutes the killing of another human being. So this is a conundrum.

Sometimes, the sick person has previously expressed clear directives about life-sustaining treatment or whether to hasten death, but then slips into a coma. The family members, wishing only for the welfare of the dying person, are then forced into deciding whether to follow their instructions. This is a very important matter requiring careful consideration.

At first impulse, we may feel that we want to help this person escape from their suffering and torment. But is it possible that they gave these directives in a state of confusion? When one is in extreme pain, one tends to look at the situation from only one angle, looking for ways to escape. Yet it may be that the illness causing this physical agony is not fatal. If we abstain from withdrawing life support and so do not cut short their life, such people may survive and recover. Sometimes we cannot be sure.

These are matters to do with external, physical conditions. Yet there are more subtle internal conditions to consider as well, namely, the mind of the patients. When they are no longer able to communicate, we do not know whether they still have some mental activity, either conscious or subconscious. Monks are often invited to give a teaching or to chant by a patient's bedside, or the relatives themselves do some chanting. The question then arises of whether the patient can hear this chanting; whether he or she is aware of it and can benefit from it.

Occasionally, the sense faculties, say the eyes or ears, do not cease functioning at the same time. Although a critically ill person may not be able to communicate, because the relevant

sense faculties cease to function, or the part of the brain that controls communicative expression fails to operate, conscious awareness may still be present. Despite some channels of cognition and perception being closed, others may remain open. Perhaps direct cognition is not possible, but indirect cognition is. Perhaps the eye can no longer perceive visual forms, but the ear can still hear sounds and the body can still contact tactile sensations. Or maybe the person is receptive to his or her environment in other ways.

For this reason, although we may believe that an unconscious person is oblivious to the sound of chanting, for example, it is possible that they can hear it, even if only indistinctly. Or perhaps they sense the surrounding atmosphere. We should thus withhold judgement, just in case. Although they may not be able to hear the chanting clearly, they may experience it like someone dreaming. Dreamers are still conscious and aware on some level. Despite assertions that dreamers are unaware of their surroundings, this is not strictly the case. For instance, one may be sleeping in a room when someone knocks repeatedly on the door – rap, rap, rap. Before waking, one may have a dream that one is on the battlefield in the Vietnam War, hearing the explosion of bombs. This dream was triggered by the knocking at the door. So, if sleep is shallow, there can be a subconscious awareness of outward surroundings.

The person does not need to wake up. Even while sleeping, one may hear sounds or be aware of one's surroundings via other sense doors, resulting in all sorts of fabricated dream images. A dreamer is still conscious and their mind is still active. During this stream of subconscious activity, outside influences have the potential to steer the mind in wholesome

directions. For instance, the indistinct sound of chanting can be beneficial, evoking auspicious mental images.[76] Therefore, we should not cut short the person's life.

It may happen that a sick person has previously requested that if they fall into a coma their life support should be removed and they should be allowed to die. In such a case, we do not know with certainty that by facilitating their death we are not denying them the opportunity to achieve some higher advantage that life has to offer, including the realization of the highest good. This fact should make us stop and reconsider. We should not be hasty, by applying a one-sided argument: 'They are miserable and in tremendous pain. What point is there for them to live on? Better to let them die.'

At the time of nearing death, some of the Buddha's disciples, despite being gravely ill, gained profound insight and realized the fruit of arahantship. Within the mental continuum, there may be a wellspring of latent wisdom and understanding. When confronted by this set of circumstances – faced with immense physical pain and approaching death – the knowledge of awakening may arise. So we should refrain from biased thinking and take this into account. Otherwise, we may curtail the possibility of enlightenment, jumping to the simple conclusion that someone is in a lot of pain and thus death is a merciful and preferable option.

This issue requires a lot of care. We should consider both whether we are adequately honouring the wishes of the ill patient, as well as whether we are honouring our own intuition of what is proper under such circumstances.

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[76] *Nimitta.*

At the very least, we should refrain from simply thinking about how to help the person die. We should also consider how to help the person die well.

Acting with Good Intentions Based on Wisdom

Today's scientific and technological advances bring with them new and unique challenges. As mentioned earlier, there are no fixed formulas for solving these dilemmas. All we have are basic principles. With wisdom, we can draw upon these principles, applying and adjusting them to specific situations.

In former times, people may have been able to rely on accepted problem-solving methods, adhering to them according to their faith and belief systems. But these days, things are more complex and these procedures are often inadequate. People should thus apply basic principles based on wise consideration. An essential ingredient here is that the principles themselves should be truly solid and reliable.

This brings us back to the two factors discussed earlier:

1. Laws inherent in nature, and an understanding of these laws.
2. Human decisions originating from intention.[77]

For life to proceed in harmony, these two factors must be integrated. When we gain some understanding of how these laws operate, we then decide how to act accordingly.

These two factors are vital criteria for evaluating and relating to matters in the world. Yet we must concede that

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[77] *Cetanā*: 'volition', 'will'.

the majority of people – often including ourselves – fail to possess a clear understanding of natural truths. We should thus always bear two things in mind:

First, when we recognize that our understanding of truth is still limited, we should apply our intelligence to the greatest degree possible, seeking out the optimum amount of data available before we make any decisions. In this way, our intention, and its accompanying deliberations, is based on the most precise and clear knowledge available.

Second, we should be dedicated and diligent in increasing this understanding and deepening our wisdom.

Having performed such an evaluation, we are ready to assess individual situations and make decisions by asking ourselves the following two questions:

- Have we examined the matter at hand in the most meticulous way possible? Have we thoroughly investigated and researched it, grounding ourselves in wisdom and understanding?
- Are we established in pure intention? In this context, this means acting from a place of kindness, compassion, and goodwill towards the patient.

Our decisions should be based on goodwill combined with wisdom. Facing specific challenges, we can find an initial level of satisfaction by accepting that we are drawing upon the maximum amount of knowledge available and we are acting from the best intention. Otherwise, deprived of fixed formulas for solving problems, we will be unable to get anything done.

Yet this is not enough. We must also remain vigilant

and circumspect. Besides drawing upon our accumulated understanding and acting on good intention, we should be committed to cultivating wisdom. We should refrain from attaching to fixed ideas and making premature judgements. We acknowledge that there is more to learn, resulting in better decisions in the future.

Wisdom has many facets. Besides understanding truths inherent in nature, we must also learn to maintain a healthy state of mind and to foster supportive social conditions. For instance, we endeavour to advance the field of medicine and engage in persistent research. We consult with others and take advice. We do not make decisions unilaterally. Joining forces and collectively investigating these issues helps to ensure that we cultivate optimum wisdom and act with the highest degree of understanding.

This goes hand in hand with good intentions. We have a sense of well-wishing for the patients, for society, and for all of humankind.

These days, our goals and aspirations to provide kind and humane medical care have acquired new complexities. For instance, in some cases, prolonging the life of an individual person entails great expense, and these costs are sometimes shouldered by the state. What sort of trouble and hardship does this cause society? These issues are now all intertwined.

Therefore, when it comes to good intention, we do not only focus on the sick and dying. We should also extend our goodwill to the living: to individuals, communities, and nations. This includes attending to such social issues as economic requirements. Our application of righteous principles encompasses all of these areas.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, I am not sure whether I clearly grasp the meaning of the title of today's talk, especially the reference to 'ramifications for Buddhism'. My intention here has been to present a general framework for understanding the principles bringing about a harmony between natural laws and the needs and desires of human beings. Although the specific term 'living will' is new to me, this is a concept that has been discussed for some time. It pertains to the present era, in which science and technology have progressed by leaps and bounds, but not necessarily in a fully balanced way. Our overall understanding of nature is still found wanting.

Mind you, it is possible that these reflections, rather than appearing useful, may only cause more confusion. Having considered them, it may be even more difficult to come to any conclusions on this matter. And yet, when faced with such challenging dilemmas, it is necessary to take into account all relevant factors.

To sum up, wisdom and wholesome intention are the key ingredients for navigating through this complex subject. Wisdom is the bridge enabling people to access the truths of nature. Moreover, it is wisdom that distinguishes human beings as unique and outstanding. Other animals, one can say, are simply a by-product or offshoot of nature. Humans, on the other hand, have the exceptional ability to gain insight into their origin – they can arrive at a comprehensive realization of nature in all its essential facets. This is wisdom.

When endowed with wisdom, people are then able to apply intention for making optimum decisions. Pure, unimpeded intention springs from wisdom. It is therefore incumbent on

us to earnestly cultivate and perfect our wisdom.

So I apologize if I have not shed adequate light on the chosen subject for today's talk. Allow me to simply leave you with these reflections. I wish to express my appreciation to all of you attending today, and may your sincerity and commitment lead to the wellbeing of everyone in society. Doubtlessly, the organizers of this event did so with goodwill towards their fellow human beings, in particular towards the frail and elderly. When such discussions commence with wholesome intention, we can say that they have an auspicious beginning. May we all build upon our good intentions and grow in wisdom, which acts as the foundation for well-informed and judicious decision-making. May you all prosper and dwell at ease.

10. Making the Final Days a Time of Realizing the Ultimate[78]

Dying a good death can be summed up simply by the Pali phrase: a*sammūḷho kālaṃ karoti* (or *asammūḷha-kālakiriyā*), meaning: 'to die mindfully, free from confusion.'

If looked at and related to skilfully, the final stage of life can be a valuable opportunity to realize goodness – even the supreme good. There are three aspects to living a virtuous and exceptional life in the period before death, namely:

1. The mind: the sick or dying person should abide in a setting conducive to joy, happiness, and ease. For instance: they see or experience the love and affection of friends and family; they hear the sound of chanting; they listen to the words of an intimate companion on such wholesome subjects as the Triple Gem; or they recollect meritorious deeds and acts of service they have performed in the past. The mind focuses on these auspicious things. Alternatively, the mind embraces a mentally created sign (*nimitta*), for example the image of a stupa or the sound of chanting, bringing about radiance, delight, tranquillity, and concentration.

2. Wisdom: the sick person should observe the world with an understanding of natural truths. They gain insight into the natural process of birth, old age, sickness, and death, and they discern the laws of impermanence, unendurability, and

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[78] This is a letter sent by Ven. P. A. Payutto on 24 October 2018 to Dr. Kanchana Kessa-ard, in reply to her questions on nursing sick monks and on how to practise the Dhamma during the final stages of one's life.

nonself.[79] They are not caught up in or attached to anything. They have let go. Their heart is spacious, buoyant, and at ease.

3. Liberation: when, with wisdom, the truth is discerned and natural laws have been comprehensively understood, the mind is delivered from all worries, bonds, and constrictions. It is radiant. Clear knowledge (*ñāṇa*) arises. The person awakens to noble path and fruit. They realize true knowledge, liberation, purity, peace – Nibbāna.[80] This realization can occur right at the final moment before dying. If this occurs the person is called a *jīvita-samasīsī.*[81] They have obtained what is most precious that life has to offer. They die a supreme death, unattainable by ordinary people.

These are Dharmic principles that can provide confidence and security. This very life is endowed with exceptional opportunities, up to our final breath. Therefore, the sick and dying should not despair or feel distraught. Their sole task is to use these final moments skilfully, in line with the Buddha's teachings.

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[79] *Anicca, dukkha,* and *anattā.*
[80] *Vijjā, vimutti, visuddhi, santi, nibbāna,* respectively.
[81] Someone who simultaneously attains an end of craving and of life.

Eternal Words of Wisdom[82]

Life is consumed night and day.
Vayo rattindivakkhayo [83]

The days and nights slip away; a person's life continually wanes in respect to opportunities for doing good.
Yaṃ yaṃ vivahate ratti tadūnantassa jīvitaṃ [84]

May the days and nights not pass in vain.
Ratyo amoghā gacchanti [85]

Time flies by, the nights swiftly pass;
The stages of life successively desert us.
Accenti kālā tarayanti rattiyo vayoguṇā anupubbaṃ jahanti [86]

The physical form of mortals decays;
Their name and ancestry do not decay.
Rūpaṃ jīrati maccānaṃ nāmagottaṃ na jīrati [87]

The young and the old, the foolish and the wise,
The wealthy and the poor, all are destined for death.
Daharāpi ca ye vuḍḍhā ye bālā ye ca paṇḍitā
Aḍḍhā ceva daliddā sabbe maccuparāyanā [88]

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[82] Trans.: in the original Thai, this section accompanies the first chapter of this book.
[83] S. I. 43.
[84] Thag. verse 451.
[85] J. VI. 25.
[86] S. I. 62. [Trans.: this is Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation in 'The Connected Discourses of the Buddha' © 2000.]
[87] S. I. 43.
[88] D. II. 120-21.

At death, no belongings can follow us.
Na miyyamānaṃ dhanamanveti kiñci [89]

Time devours all beings, while consuming itself as well.
Kālo ghasati bhūtāni sabbāneva sahattanā [90]

Rather than mourn the deceased we should mourn for ourselves,
Who are constantly under Death's dominion.
Taṃ tañce anusoceyya yaṃ yaṃ tassa na vijjati
Attānamanusoceyya sadā maccuvasaṃ pattaṃ [91]

Life force is independent of people's heedless behaviour while they are standing, walking, sitting, and lying down.
Na heva tiṭṭhaṃ nāsīnaṃ na sayānaṃ na patthaguṃ [92]

Life relentlessly ebbs away, with every blink of the eye.
Yāvuppatti nimissati tatrāpi saratī vayo [93]

As life is thus consumed, separation is beyond doubt.
Rather than bemoaning the deceased, those beings still alive should treat each other with clemency and goodwill.
Tatthattani vatappanthe vinābhāve asaṁsaye
Bhūtaṃ sesaṃ dayitabbaṃ cavitaṃ ananusociyaṃ [94]

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[89] M. II. 73.
[90] J. II. 260.
[91] J. III. 95.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.

Just as children cry for the orbiting moon,
So people idly mourn the loss of those they love.
Those dead and cremated know not their relatives' lament.
Therefore, I do not grieve; he fares the way he had to tread.
Yathāpi dārako candaṃ gacchantaṃ anurodati
Evaṃ sampadamevetaṃ yo petamanusocati
Dayhamāno na jānāti ñātīnaṃ paridevitaṃ
Tasmā etaṃ na socāmi gato so tassa yā gati [95]

As ripe fruit is in constant danger of falling,
So too living beings are in constant danger of death.
Phalānamiva pakkānaṃ niccaṃ patanato bhayaṃ
Evaṃ jātāna maccānaṃ niccaṃ maraṇato bhayaṃ [96]

In the morning one sees many people; by evening some will have vanished.
In the evening one sees many people; by morning some have disappeared.
Sāyameke na dissanti pāto diṭṭhā bahū janā
Pāto eke na dissanti sāyaṃ diṭṭhā bahū janā [97]

Dying we depart alone; born we arrive alone.
Relationships amongst beings are mere encounters.
Ekova macco acceti ekova jāyate kule
Saṁyogaparamātveva sambhogā sabbapāṇinaṃ [98]

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[95] J. III. 166. [Based on the translation by H.T. Francis & R.A. Neil in The Jataka Volume III, published by the Pali Text Society.]
[96] J. IV. 127.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid.

When overcome by Death, neither children, nor parents, nor friends can offer protection;
Family provides no refuge.
Na santi puttā tāṇāya na pitā napi bandhavā
Antakenādhipannassa nathi ñātīsu tāṇatā [99]

Behold! People are set to depart in conformity with their actions;
All beings are terrified when trapped by Death.
Aññepi passa gamine yathākammūpage nare
Maccuno vasamāgamma phandantevidha pāṇino [100]

Just as a waking person no longer sees the visions of his dreams,
Likewise one does not meet loved ones when they are dead and gone.
Supinena yathāpi saṅgataṃ paṭibuddho puriso na passati
Evampi piyāyitaṃ janaṃ petaṃ kālakataṃ na passati [101]

The days and nights pass by; life's duration constantly shrinks.
Yassa ratyā vivasāne āyu appataraṃ siyā [102]

The world of living creatures is mauled by Death and engulfed by old age.
Maccunābbhahato loko jarāya parivārito [103]

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[99] Dh. verse 288.
[100] Sn. 114.
[101] Sn. 159.
[102] J. VI. 25.
[103] Ibid.

Just as a brimming river does not flow back upwards,
So too human beings do not return to youth.
Yathā vārivaho pūro gacchaṃ na parivattati
Evamāyu manussānaṃ gacchaṃ na parivattati [104]

Therefore, with the life remaining, people should fulfil their responsibilities and take heed.
Tasmā idha jīvitasese kiccakaro siyā naro na ca majje [105]

Nowhere have I committed any evil; therefore, I fear not impending death.
Pāpañca me natthi kuhiñci tasmā na saṅke maraṇāgamāya [106]

[104] J. VI. 26.
[105] Sn. 131.
[106] J. VI. 312.