

Ajahn Viradhammo

Welcome

Lovely to see so many people here remembering Akka. I don't know all of you. I am sure the family is very happy that so many people could come to support them in their time of grieving. I think she would be have been happy with the rain. She'd be out in the garden right now. Akka did the garden for us here. She also planted a lot of service berry trees last year. She knew the tent. She used to come and meditate here. She is very much with me on this day, obviously as she is with all of us, each in our different way.

To lose a daughter is a heavy thing; my condolences. A sister, mother, a friend, these are intensely personal things and difficult to bear so the fact that we can come together and have a ritual of passage that remembers Akka in a way which is significant is good. It's a good thing to do. Apologies for the leaky roof. We are getting a new tent but that will take a while.

The tradition that I am from is very similar to the tradition that exists in Sri Lanka and Akka was born in Colombo, so you would have seen services like this and be familiar with this kind of ceremony. In a Buddhist memorial or ceremony like this, there are two parts to it. One is the remembering of Akka, tribute to her and remembering her each in our different ways, through some speech, through some words and the second part is a contemplation of mortality. All of us is involved with this. There is birth, there is death. That's the nature of things. We can't really get away from that. I think for all of us, when someone close to us dies, we think of our own passing. We think of the passing of our parents, our children, our loved ones, our close ones. It becomes deeply significant in a personal way and yet in a universal way because we are all the same in that sense. Death is the great leveler. The great leveler.

Ajahn Viradhammo

Thank you for those beautiful words.

So now for the Buddhist part of the ceremony. Most of you are unfamiliar with Buddhist rituals. Akka asked me the last time I saw her if I would conduct a memorial for her in the monastery. She asked also if I would say a few words. Our tradition comes from Sri Lanka and there are a couple of pieces in the tradition I think that would help if you knew because we are also reflecting on Akka's spiritual life. And, her spiritual life is how she faced death. Often times we ask what is the meaning of life but what is the meaning of death? We all face that. We have to face the death of our loved ones, my mom, my dad, my friends. And that reflection of birth and death is very central in the Buddhist search for freedom and Akka was certainly adept at that. Her mindfulness and her strength of awareness as death approached from pancreatic cancer was very inspiring, very inspiring indeed.

We have a ritual chant that we do, called Matika chanting. And this is chanting which is in our scriptural language in Pali which is a sister language to Sanskrit.

The meaning of the chants is a reflection on the naturalness of the human condition in all its variations and the naturalness of death; a natural phenomena. We will chant that and overpower the rain. If you listen to these sounds and think of Akka, think whatever you like. Wish her well, let your heart be open to whatever emotions and feelings you have towards her. And then after the chant, I'll offer some words of reflection.

- Matika Chanting -

Reflections

If you let me say a few words of reflection. In the Buddhist way of looking at things, when someone dies it is obviously a very, very powerful time for contemplation, because all of the trivialities and pettiness's of life fall away and are no longer important. What is important becomes foremost in consciousness. I think that is an important thing to reflect on. One of the things that came up for me was this strange juxtaposition of beauty and pain. Cancer is an ugly business, physically it is not beautiful. And yet there was so much beauty in Akka's dying. There was the compassion and the giving. There were so many good things that came to her that she felt overwhelmed with that gratitude for the goodness. Mixed up with something so horrible, and it is horrible, and yet it is natural. And in the naturalness of it, we all arise to something that is beyond our egos, beyond pettiness, beyond personal histories, behind all of that that we sometimes get caught up in to. All the trivial things of life.

And yet when someone is dying what is important is love. It doesn't take great savvy to know that. We all know that. We are reminded through Akka's dying and through her courage and resolve to do this well, we are reminded in a way that uplifts us. As Steph said, all of us are given a kind of teaching which is very important because from this day forward we want to honour Akka. We want to celebrate her life, like these beautiful flowers... who did that?...[Heidi]. That is just a beautiful, beautiful, beautiful offering to her.

And really, we want our lives to be a bit like that, don't we? And that, we can resolve from here on out. How can I honour Akka's life? Well, being beautiful. (But not, you know, at 70 year's old; we just had a birthday party here two days ago, so birth and death.... This is how it works). But beauty is about the heart isn't it. It is not about your complexion or the colour of your eyes. Beauty is something of the heart and Akka was a beautiful woman. She was reflective, contemplative, hardworking. She made a beautiful garden for us. So I had a really, I didn't know her that long, but I had a really interesting friendship with her. When she came to me, she came here to talk, she had the diagnoses for about a month or so and it was terminal, there were no real options, chemotherapy was really not on. And I asked her so what do you think happens after? Do you think it's a black hole? I ask that to a lot of people. What do you think when the body dies and the senses aren't working and the memory is not there anymore, or is kaput, totally wiped out, nothing? To me that is an important aspect of the world view each one of us has. Obviously in Buddhism we don't think that consciousness ceases with death of the body. So I asked, what do you think? Is it a black hole? And she said, no, no I don't think that. So then

we chatted and so okay, this life is coming to an end, how are you going to approach the dying? How are you going to approach the next chapter? And, because she is a contemplative and a meditator she realised that the real refuge now, as the body was dying, was awareness. That's all you have. You don't have your memories, they go. Your eye goes, all sense experience goes. Awareness. So we started talking about awareness. What is awareness? What is it that knows you feel pain? What is it that knows right now the sound of the rain on the roof? It's different. What is it that knows that you feel cold and what is it that knows that there is sound? That knowing stays. That knowing doesn't change. The objects change. Sound, sight memory, feeling, emotion, all of that's always changing. And so what I encouraged her, which was already part of her practice, well why don't you try to focus on what is unchanging. What is unchanging in the withering of the body? What is unchanging and that would be awareness. Buddhist way of looking at it is a different take on spirituality. We talk about something which isn't born and doesn't die. This is one of the ways we talk about nirvana. Nirvana isn't a rock group, by the way. And it's not an island in the Pacific. The word nirvana has a connotation of being a place but it's a mode of consciousness. And what Akka's spiritual practice would be...

And, by the way, I asked Akka the last time, what shall I talk about, it's your memorial. And she said, well, talk about, what you talk about. So here I am talking about, what I talk about, which is a relief...

So anyhow, consider. Consider your own dying. Consider the dying of the body. You can be aware of that. You can feel pain. You can feel fear. You can feel all manner of emotions and you can be aware of that. And in that changing-ness of the body, we say that in the death of the body is one of the prime times to realise the unconditioned, the unborn, nirvana. Because that's when consciousness which is now embedded and incarnate in the body, when the body falls away, what happens to consciousness? So I put it to her as a kind of query; send me a postcard, I said to her, see if I am right or wrong. Because I don't know. I've never done it before, at least I can't remember. It does seem to me, and this is my faith in the Buddhist teaching, that there is an element which isn't personal. Personal is like emotion, body and feeling. But awareness is not personal. Your awareness, like Anne's awareness, is no different from my awareness. The content of her awareness is different. Right? You have different memories, but awareness, what is awareness?

So Anne suggested (she coached me on this talk by the way), maybe I could relay where the Buddha came from on his spiritual journey. It is a kind of allegory; an allegory which simplifies his own insights. The Buddha was known as Siddhartha before he became enlightened. He was a very accomplished and successful person but he had doubt. He didn't see the meaning of existence – he hadn't found the meaning of existence. So the story goes that his father tried to protect him from seeking meaning and just be a good king. Do the family business and just keep the place going. But Siddhartha is very, very questioning and as the allegory goes, one day he was out and his charioteer (they had chariots then, not lexus), took him out and he saw a sick person. And Siddhartha had never seen a sick person (this is an allegory), and he looks at the sick person and the person is really writhing in pain, deep deep, really a lot of pain, and Siddhartha is shocked. He asks Channa, the charioteer, what is that? And Channa says that is a

sick person, we all get sick. And the conceit of good health falls away from him. By conceit of good health, you know when everyone else gets the flu and you don't? You think you are immune. None of us are immune. Sickness is sickness. The conceit of good health falls way. Another day he is out with Channa and sees an old person, really, really old, bent over with osteoporosis and not functioning very, very well and he is shocked again and asks, what's that? That's an old person. If we don't die young we will all go that way. And the conceit of youth fell away. And then finally, he goes out with Channa and sees a corpse. He has never seen a corpse. Never seen death and says, what's that? It's a corpse. We all die. In the nature of birth there is death. And now the conceit of life leaves him. And now he is really confused. What is the meaning of this whole business? If that's it. It's just birth and death. Is it just eat, drink and be merry until you die? Is that the whole thing? And he felt, no, there must be something more. And he was in a culture, the Indian culture, that had a sense of transcendence, the unconditioned of liberation from the round of birth and death. And on the fourth of these outings, he comes across an ascetic, meditating under a tree and he said what is that? That is an ascetic and he is seeking the unconditioned, the deathless, liberation from the rounds. And that was the point of Buddha leaving his family life, becoming an ascetic and becoming enlightened.

So my suggestions to Akka as she was dying was to check it out. Are you just this body? Are you just these emotions or is there something we are missing? Is there something more? And I reckon she had the equipment to see deeply in to this possibility. Because she had been contemplating and had a strong practice of awareness.

So for you, you have your own philosophies, you all have your own religious viewpoints and so on, but I would suggest one nice practice when someone dies, a nice meditation practice, is the practice of forgiveness. It is a really beautiful thing to do. In the quietness of your own home, bring forth a thought: Akka for anything that I have done which has been harmful to you or insensitive, I ask for your forgiveness. And just sit with that. Just let that become conscious and see what that produces. And then after sitting quietly, Akka: for anything that you have done to me that has been unkind or insensitive, I forgive you. And then sit with that one. So you make conscious all your feelings, let them go and then, from now on take the love that you have for Akka and see how can I now make that part of my spiritual path because the entry point in to the unconditioned is through the heart, through love. And the love you have for Akka is a foundation for something even more profound and more deep.

I'll leave that for you to contemplate.

We have one more part to the ceremony.

This tradition comes from the very early days of the life of the Buddha. In those days the Buddhist community was unknown and the monks who were training under the Buddha, had taken vows of poverty so they had no money and they really lived according to the goodness of people around them. Robe's cloth was hard to come by. They were known as rag robe wearers. They would get bits of cloth, wash them, dye them and stitch them together to make robes.

One of the places where they would get cloth was in the charnel grounds because one of their contemplations was to go to places of death and to contemplate death and to contemplate the deathless, the unconditioned, their aspiration. And so the shrouds that had been put on the corpses would be taken off. It sounds rather ghoulish but you have to get yourself back 2600 years to the difficulty of getting cloth. So a piece of cloth was very, very valuable. So the shroud would be taken and the monks would chant Annica Vata Sankhara, which we will chant shortly, and would reflect on death and that would hopefully motivate them to practice hard for the realisation of the unconditioned. When the order became more well known and more well supported, lay people saw this happening and began to bin cloth to the charnel, ground for the monks to collect. As land was offered and monasteries became more settled lay people would do this ritual to remember this reflection of birth and death and this aspiration to nirvana.

Mr. and Mrs. Janssen will offer the cloth, I'll receive it and they will be seated. We will chant the Annica Vata Sankhara. Which is chant which is very famous in Sri Lanka. It is a reflection on that which has the nature to arise, has the nature to cease. And in the ceasing, if you can notice something ceasing, you notice behind it, there is the unceasing, peace of consciousness.

- Annica Vata Sankhara Chant -

That is the last part of the ceremony. To finish we thought it would be nice to do something communally. The Metta chant of universal kindness. That will conclude the ceremony.

[To read the chant, please see [Chant of Loving Kindness](#)]

Thank you all for coming. Enjoy the rest of the day to celebrate Akka. Thank you.