



## **Three Stories about Steve Jobs' Life Philosophy**

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*Translated by Phap Than-Dharmakāya*

The author has no relations to Steve Jobs in any way. The only connection that the author has with Steve Jobs is simply a Macbook Air computer that was purchased a few months ago . . . The joys with the MacBook were quickly transformed into a feeling of sadness when the author learned that the creator of this device has departed from this world permanently. This sense of sadness is deepened when he learned that five years earlier Steve Jobs had spoken about his own mortality at Stanford University, a place that also holds much memories for the author. This short article represents a reflection and an expression of appreciation to Steve Jobs, not due to the author's admiration for the super thin devices such as MacBook Air, the iPad, or iPhone, etc. . . but because of the author's strong emotion in response to Steve Jobs' profound message about life that is very Buddhist in nature. This message is a beautiful one to this world, especially to the younger people and individuals who live for beauty, love, and ideals. Below are reflections on three beautiful stories that Steve Jobs shared in his commencement speech at Stanford University in 2005.

- **Karma is like connecting the dots . . .**

The first story that Steve Jobs shared with us was his decision to drop out of college. This is an emotional story. Steve Jobs recounted that he dropped out of school, not because he was lazy or unmotivated, but because a sense of guilt that his college tuition was consuming his parents' life savings, and that he did not find any interest in his studies. After six months of college, he dropped out of school. But he continued to audit classes, including classes in calligraphy as well as other classes that he found interesting but which he did not know would have much application or value in the future.

During a difficult period of transition for young Steve Jobs, he decided to go on a path, which conveys love and consideration for his parents as well as his deep admiration and love for beauty and elegance. These were the principles that guided his life. Looking back at his life, he told the graduating students at Stanford that *“You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something – your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down, and it has made all the difference in my life.”*

Ten years later, Steve Jobs reflected that his success was attributable to the process that guided the important decisions in his life. He explained that he viewed life with his eyes; he spoke with his own inner voice (and did not allow opinions of others to drown out his own voice), and he lived his life based upon his love and admiration for beauty and elegance originating from deep inside him. Most people would say that it is not “realistic” for a young person to drop out of college and to take classes in calligraphy. But in looking back, Steve Jobs concluded: *“It was beautiful, historical, and artistically subtle in a way that science can't capture, and I found it fascinating. None of this had*

*even a hope of any practical application in my life. But ten years later, when we were designing the first Macintosh computer, it all came back to me.”*

Steve Jobs’ self-reflections of the experience of his youth are meaningful. The first story that he shared conveyed his sincere advice to young people who are starting out in life: Let your mind gaze and admire beauty and elegance, regardless of its simplicity, even in the worst of circumstances, because “true beauty” will serve to refresh and soothe the difficulties in one’s life. And let your love and respect for your parents, your empathy for the hardships of those around you, and an admiration for beauty to guide your difficult decisions. Clearly, Steve Jobs’ life philosophy was based upon empathy and compassion for others, as well as a true love for beauty.

- **Being at Ease with Both Success and Failure**

The second story is equally emotional as the first. It illustrates the meaning of love and of loss. Steve Jobs and his friend started Apple from his adoptive parents’ garage when he was only 20 years old. Ten years later, Apple had grown to a major corporation of \$2 billion and 4,000 employees. At the height of his success at the tender age of 30, Steve Jobs suffered a humiliating setback -- he was fired from Apple due to a fundamental disagreement with the individual that he had hired to be CEO of Apple. Apple’s Board of Directors sided with the CEO. Steve Jobs was devastated as a result of being fired from the company that he himself has established. But deep in heart, Steve Jobs experienced an inner *miracle* – he discovered that he had not lost his love and passion for his work. Following being ousted from Apple in a very public way, he proceeded to establish a new company, NeXT, and then another company, Pixar through which he also met a woman who later became his wife. Interestingly, shortly after NeXT became a major commercial success, Apple bought out NeXT -- a company that

invented many of the components/concepts that helped to re-invent Apple to the world-class company as it is today. Later, Steve Jobs reflected as follows: *“Getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life.”*

Steve Jobs’ self-reflections demonstrate a deep wisdom comparable to that of a Zen Master. He shared with us an important lesson from his personal journey: Failure is not something to be afraid of. Indeed, what we should be afraid of is the loss of love and passion for life. In the midst of his painful experience, he, instead of feeling sad, angry or sorry for himself, marched onward guided by his passion for his work. As a Buddhist, Steve Jobs closely adhered to Buddha’s teachings by making strong efforts to transcend the forces of the eight conditions that afflict and paralyze most people in this world, they are gain and loss, pleasure and pain, praise and blame, fame and defame. In so doing, he was able to awaken his true love and ideals. (See Sutra Anguttara Nikaya AN 8.6). Indeed, if we always live based upon these eight states of status, even if we live another hundred years, we will continue to live a life of suffering. It is because the nature of life is constantly and forever changing. The only way to escape this state of suffering is to transcend above these eight conditions and to live with peace and inner calmness. This is especially important in creating a new life following a disappointing or difficult period in one’s life. If we live life based upon Steve Jobs’ philosophy -- calmness in the face of success or failure -- we will experience peace and happiness.

- **To be Mindful of Impermanence (Death) is To Live Better and More Fully**

Steve Jobs’ third story serves as book-end to his life. Oddly, during the commencement speech at Stanford University, he told a story about impermanence – and

how death as the end to all living things. Of course, with an important speech in such a formal environment, the story was presented in a clear and deliberate manner – i.e., it was not off the cuff, spontaneous type of a remark.

Steve Jobs began his story as follows: *“Every morning I asked myself: If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today? And whenever the answer has been “no” for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something.”* His deliberate approach to living – and his mindfulness as to his life – may have originated from his condition with having pancreatic cancer. This condition may have helped him to recognize the truth as to impermanence and Death. But it did not lead him to Buddhism. He came to Buddhism when he was young and at an age when most do not pay attention to such philosophical issues as the problem of impermanence or birth and death.

Even though he had a major illness, his mind did not diminish in any way. To the contrary, Steve Jobs’ mind became even more focused and strong. He emphasized: *“Remembering that I’ll be dead soon is the most important tool I’ve encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything – all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure – these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose.”*

It appears that Steve Jobs had deeply understood the nature of Death. One of the methods that the Buddha taught was the mindfulness on Death (mindfulness on extinction). Coincidentally, Steve Jobs’ story seemed related to the story in Buddhist scriptures about a sixteen year old girl of Alavi, who spun silk for living. . The young girl

was very successful in her spiritual development based upon this mindfulness; like Jobs, she also died at a young age.

But perhaps Steve Jobs may have recognized his own mortality when he unequivocally stated: *“No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don’t want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life’s change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new. Right now, the new is you, but someday not too long from now, you will gradually become the old and be cleared away. Sorry to be so dramatic, but it is quite true.”*

Indeed, such a direct observation about life and life’s constant changes may sound sad and gloomy. But this is not a pessimistic observation – it is the truth whether we want to hear it or not. It is important to emphasize that mindfulness on death is not to want to die. Instead, mindfulness on death helps us to live better and fuller in a richer way, less restricted and with more freedom to strive for our passions and our concepts of what is beautiful. Steve Jobs’ passion for beauty and elegance was expressed in comment that he had about Apple’s competitor: *“The only problem with Microsoft is that they just have no taste. They have absolutely no taste. And I don’t mean that in a small way. I mean that in a big way, in the sense that they don’t think of original ideas, and they don’t bring much culture into their products.”* PBS Documentary, *Triumph of the Nerds*, 1996). This comment reflects his commitment to beauty and elegance and take us back to his life philosophy of connecting the dots and the beauty of calligraphy that he shared with us in his first story.

Meditation on Death based on Buddhist teaching and which Steve Jobs applied to his own life is not to be pessimistic about life. To the contrary, to understand the nature

of death opens a wide road for us – a road with endless opportunities to live in a full and rich way, to transform and develop one’s dreams and ideals – and to leave behind all obsessive notions of gain and loss, pleasure and pain, praise and blame, fame and defame as a result of dualistic view. Indeed, this reflects a great achievement by a mind that has transcended the world of impermanence as a result of *true understanding* as to the nature of impermanence. We should not wait until we are old to understand the true meaning and value of life. Steve Jobs understood the meaning and value of being mindful and aware of Death. From this insight, he endeavored to live life as fully as he could in his passionate, pursuit of beauty and his dreams to the very end of his life. The powerful driver of Steve Jobs’ pursuit did not originate from his desire for success or aversion to failure but from his respect for life, his respect for meaningful life values, and above all, his respect for the Beauty, Truth, and Goodness.

In this respect, perhaps, it may be more profound to hear Steve Jobs’ own words as to the source of happiness in his life: “*Being the richest man in the cemetery doesn’t matter to me. . . Going to bed at night saying we’ve done something wonderful . . . that what matters to me.*” – The Wall Street Journal, 1993.

Farewell to beautiful spirit that is full of love!

Khai Thien

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