

Respecting Death

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Meditation is a skill. You can do it well; you can do it poorly. Most people don't like to hear about that. Sometimes you're told that there's no such thing as a good meditation or bad meditation, that it's all good, but that's not true. The issue is how you judge what's good and what's not good, and how you react to the judgment. When you notice things aren't going well, you have to accept the fact that, yes, they're not well. They could be better. But then the next question is how you're going to react to that. If you get yourself tied up in recriminations, that's an unskillful use of your powers of judgment. The skillful use is to learn to look for cause and effect: When things aren't going well, why aren't they going well? Try out different approaches to see what works and what doesn't work, and in that way you learn. Your powers of judgment actually are an important part of developing the skill. So try to bring all your skills, all the skillful qualities of the mind, to bear.

The Buddha said that skillful qualities are all rooted in heedfulness: the realization that there are dangers in life—aging, illness, and death being the big dangers—but we can prepare for them. If we couldn't prepare for them, if we were totally left adrift, there would be no need to heedful. The fact is, though, that there are dangers and there is something we can do about them. We can learn how to face those dangers without suffering. That's why we have to put energy into the practice, because you don't know when they're going to hit. For some of us, aging is going to be quite a ways down the line; for others it's already here. Actually, aging starts as soon as you're born, but it gets really bad as you go further down the line. But death: Death could happen at any time. You have to respect that.

That's what respect for death means, realizing that it is a big danger. On the one hand, respect for death—aging, illness, and death—means that you have to learn not to be disgusted by people who show really bad signs of aging, illness, or death. There are always people who are not aging gracefully, who are going through severe illnesses, or whose death is really miserable. You have to remember that they are human beings too. Some people refuse to go see some who's dying, saying, "I don't want to see that person in such bad shape." Well, that person is still a person. If you can offer some kindness, some help and support, if you're not put off by all the gross physical details of what happens to a body as it ages and grows ill and dies, that's one kind of respect for aging, illness, and death.

Another kind requires that you realize that these really are the big dangers in life. The body grows less and less and less under your control. Things start falling apart. You realize that what you thought you could control, you can't anymore. There's a great line in the Canon where the king who doesn't understand that line—the world is swept away, it does not endure—asks: What does this mean? He's an 80-year-old man. Ven. Ratthapala, the monk he's talking to asks him, "When you were young, were you strong?" And the king says, "Yes, I thought I had the strength of two men." "How about now?" "Well, sometimes I mean to put my foot in one place and I end up putting it someplace else." The body goes totally out of your control. No matter how much you put in to keep it fit and strong and healthy, it grows more and more out of control.

Your mind can also grow more and more out of control. But this is where meditation can make a difference.

If you learn how to control your thoughts, you can have control over what you're identifying with at any particular time. If you're identifying with your thwarted desires, it makes the process of aging, illness, and death more and more miserable. But if but you can develop mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment, you can pare down this area of your identification, so that when the body goes, you realize it's just the body. You don't have to identify with it. Even when your brain starts malfunctioning, you realize it's just the brain malfunctioning. You don't have to get upset by it. You can see through its illusions.

My teacher had a student one time who had to undergo heart surgery. When he came out of the operation, it wasn't long before he realized that they'd made a mistake. When they turned off some of his arteries, they had pinched one of the arteries that went to his brain, and his brain was not functioning properly. There were times he would think something, and the brain would send out message that he'd also said it. A person who wasn't mindful might get upset that nobody was responding to what he'd said. But he began to realize, "This is a wrong message." Or vice versa, when he actually said something when he thought he had only thought it, and people started reacting. He realized, "The brain is not sending me good information." He had the mindfulness and alertness to step back and not get taken in by the misinformation he was getting from his brain. Ultimately, over time, his brain finally recovered. But the fact he had been meditating meant that it involved a lot less suffering, both himself and for the people around him.

So you have to have respect for these things. The body can malfunction. Death is not pretty. Death is not pleasant. We would like to think that our lives will have a nice sense of closure, but usually it doesn't close off that way. It's just fragments.

Things unravel. Sometimes you see things that you worked hard at all your life falling apart before your eyes.

This is why the meditation is so important. It's one of the few things that can see you through that experience so that you don't suffer. And this is why recollection of death is traditionally used to spur you on the practice, to be heedful, to get over your laziness, realizing you don't know how much time you have, and death is a big problem.

Sometimes the suffering of death is minimized. People say, "Of course, death is a part of life and you want to live, right? So we have to accept the death as part of it as well and try to prettify it." That's basically an annihilationist view, i.e., the idea that once death is over, there's nothing left, so if you want to celebrate life, you have to celebrate death, too.

That's not the Buddha's take on it. As he says, death is what usually follows on birth, but there's a state of mind that doesn't have to experience birth and death. There is a dimension of the mind, let's put it that way, that lies beyond these things. That's where true happiness lies. So for him, the connection between birth and death sends a message: Let's do something that goes beyond birth and death, the opposite of what you hear nowadays which is, "After all, you can't have life without death, so if you're going to celebrate life, let's celebrate death." But there's nothing to celebrate in death. It's miserable: the separation, the pain, the disorientation that can often come. You've got to have respect for these things. These are big dangers. It's like going out in the wilderness: You have to have respect for the fact that there are bears out there or other wild animals. There are all kinds of things that can happen, so you have to prepare. If you don't prepare, you're not showing respect for the dangers.

So meditation is preparation. There's a whole set of Dhamma talks by Ajaan Mahaboowa in Thai called *Tham Chut Triam Phrawm*, which means basically "A Set of Dhamma Talks for Getting Ready." Getting ready for what? Getting ready for the big danger of death, respecting the fact that there's a lot of potential for suffering there, but also respecting the fact that you've got this training that can prepare you, using your concentration, using your discernment, using your mindfulness and alertness to sidestep all the potential dangers that are out there. If you meditate well enough to have a taste of deathless before the death comes, then you're in a much better position, because you know for sure as you're going into the experience that there's something there that doesn't die.

As the Buddha said, there are four reasons we fear death. One is because we're going to miss all the sensual pleasures we've had in life. The second is that we're going to have to abandon the body that we're so attached to. The third is, if we've

done anything cruel in life, there's always a possibility that we're going to have to suffer the consequences of that cruelty. And the fourth is being uncertain about the true Dhamma. This is the important one. If you know the true Dhamma, that there really is a deathless, that takes a lot of the fear of death away right there.

So this is how we prepare. We develop the mental skills that we'll need, so as things start slipping away, we're in a position where we can let them go, let them do their own thing without our having to suffer, without our having to have them ripped away from our grasp.

So, be heedful, because everything skillful you're going to develop in life depends on heedfulness as its root.