

You're Already Dead

August 13, 2009

A woman once came to meditate for two weeks at Wat Dhammasatit, and on her second day there she came to see Ajaan Fuang. She said, "I have to go home." He said, "Why?" She said, "I'm worried about my husband and my children. How are they going to eat? Who's going to wash the clothes? Who's going to look after the house?" He told her, "Tell yourself that you've died. They'll have to be able to look after themselves one way or another. So every time a thought comes up, remind yourself, 'I've already died. I can't go back.'" She took his instructions and was able to stay for a whole two weeks.

Of course, that lesson is immediately relevant to our staying here, away from the responsibilities of our work and our family. It's one good way of cutting through all the entanglements we tend to carry with us. It's like a knife that can cut right through them, to remind you that you've got to stay right here, and there's no use in worrying about your responsibilities outside, afraid that the world can't get along without you. It will too, perfectly well or perfectly horrible or whatever, but it's going to do its own world thing, whether you're there or not. This helps cut through your sense of self-importance, and focuses you on what's really important, the business that really needs to be done, which is straightening out your own mind right here and now.

But it's also a useful teaching to use when you go back. When issues come up that cause you worry and distress, just tell yourself, "I'm already dead." It helps put the issue into perspective. On the surface it may sound morbid but it's not. It's actually liberating. I know of someone who was participating in a series of seminars on death and dying, and for one of the seminars, the teacher took him aside beforehand and said, "I want you to tell everybody when you go into the room that you're already dead. Then act as if you're already dead—of course, not lying there like a corpse on the floor, but having the attitude of someone who's already died and is able to come back for a brief visit."

The student found it liberating. He could talk to people with a lot more freedom and frankness, and a lot less concern about what they might think about him, or how could win their approval. The following week, when he came back for the next course, he was his old self again, alive. And one of the women in the course took him aside afterwards, and said, "You know, I liked you better when you were dead."

So it's not morbid. It's actually liberating, freeing, to be able to look at all your worries and all your concerns of daily life from this perspective. You get a true sense of what's important and what's not. You find yourself acting not out of worry for the future, for with that question: "If I were to die tomorrow, what would I have liked to have said today? Or if I had a chance to come back after I was dead, what would I want to say to this person?" you might actually say it.

This practice is recommended for people who have already developed a sense of what's skillful and what's not, and desire to do what's skillful, because there are people in this world who would like to come back and inflict a little revenge if they had the chance. But if you're serious about doing what's skillful—trying to be compassionate, trying to have integrity in your actions, respecting everyone's desire for happiness—then this ability to think of death is not all that scary. It lifts your fears, living your life with that perspective.

You can ask yourself, "If I were to die and were looking back at my life, looking back at today, what would I wish I had done today? What would I wish I'd said today?" Knowing that most of your ordinary worries and cares are rendered pretty meaningless by death, then live your life from that perspective. Say the good things you will have wished you had said, do the good things you will have wished you had done.

If you stop and think about this, you'll see that you will have wished you'd spent more time training the mind. When you're dealing with other people, you will have wished you had said the kind thing, the helpful thing, the appropriate thing, something that wasn't worried about what you could get out of that person, or what you wanted that person to be, but simply expressing your concern, expressing your compassion, and looking at your own mind, what you wished to have done. You'll have seen that the skills you develop as a meditator—being mindful, being alert, having a sense of restraint—proved to be really useful. And you would wish you had done it more.

There's a story Ajaan Lee tells of a woman who came to a monastery and saw that one of the walking meditation paths was dirty. So she swept it and set out some water. She felt really good about what she had done. It so happened on her return home she had a heart attack and died, reborn as a deva. She asked herself, "Gee, what did I do to deserve this?" The memory came to her that she had swept the path. So she thought, "Suppose I had done more than that? I'd have an even nicer palace and even nicer setup here."

So she went back down and found a meditating monk out in a forest and just stood there staring at him to see what she could do for him. It turned out he had psychic powers. He could see her, and so he chased her away: "Stop trying to butt

in on human beings' merit. You had all that opportunity when you were alive. Stop being so greedy. Let human beings have a chance to make some merit." So she fled back to her palace.

The lesson here being that when you have a chance to do good, do it. Learn how to see which of your concerns are important, and which ones would be rendered meaningless by death. And remember, "Oh yeah, I am going to die. I don't have all the time in the world, but I do have this moment. What's the best thing to do with this moment? How can I make the most of it?"

When you look at each moment from this perspective, you're using what the Buddha called recollection of death in the right way. It's not meant to be depressing. It's not meant to be discouraging. It's simply meant to get your priorities straight, as to what's important and what's not.

And it lifts a huge burden off the mind. There's no way you're going to be able to tie down all the loose ends of your life, all your outside affairs. But you do want to have developed as many skillful qualities in your mind as you can, because those are the things you take with you: qualities the Buddha calls noble treasures.

The first treasure is conviction in the Buddha's awakening and what it means for your life. In other words, he was able to find true happiness through his own efforts, developing qualities in his mind that you have in a potential form in your mind.

Virtue: being restrained in your actions, not harming yourself, not harming anybody else,

Having a sense of shame and compunction: Shame here doesn't mean that you're ashamed of yourself, you're just ashamed at the thought of doing something unskillful, because you know better. You're a better person than that, so why are you doing that?

Compunction is the fear of the consequences that come when you act in a shoddy way. When the mind says, "I don't care," and gets irresponsible and apathetic, you don't listen to it. You realize that your actions *do* have consequences, and you've met up with the consequences of unskillful actions in the past. Do you want more of those? Well, no. This is a healthy fear. And it's a treasure. If you have shame and compunction, you don't do things that you'll later regret. With regret, once it digs into the mind, there's nothing you can do to get it out, no amount of money to make it go away, which is why shame and compunction are treasures.

There's learning the Dhamma, which means not only listening but also thinking about it, questioning it. When the Buddha taught, he didn't teach nice-sounding platitudes. He didn't offer things for your reflection without being

responsible about what he was saying. Everything he said had meaning. And he recommended that the monks question him if there was anything they didn't understand. In fact, you were doing him a favor if you questioned him right then and there. That was his attitude. He's not here anymore, but you want to question his teachings: "How do these things have a meaning in my life?" Ask yourself *that* question. Do your best to figure that out. Then put the teachings into practice. That tests your understanding and refines it, to see what he really did mean about mindfulness, alertness, ardency.

Another treasure is generosity. You know that someday you're going to have to give up everything you have, so before it's wrenched from your grasp, learn how to let it go. If you see something that you have and someone else could use well, make a practice of giving it. The mind gets lighter, more expansive. That sense of spaciousness in the mind, when you're not always worried about losing this or being deprived of that: That sense of space can't be bought.

Then there's discernment, the ability to see things arising and passing away in the mind, so that you can understand what's skillful and what's not, what needs to be developed, what needs to be abandoned.

All these things are treasures. These are the things that stick with you even after you die. Working from the perspective of death, these are the things you should be focusing on.

So when you tell yourself that you've already died, it's not to make you depressed, despondent, or hopeless. It's just to put everything in a clear light. And the dispassion that comes from seeing things in that clear light is not oppressing. It's liberating. There's a sense of relief: You've put down all your petty concerns. You've let yourself focus on the things that are really important. In that way you're alive—more alive than normal. You're living your life well.