

Heedful of Death

August 30, 2009

Years back, there was a Broadway musical, *A Hundred and Ten Degrees in the Shade*, which was about the miserable heat the pioneers had to go through as they moved into the Midwest. Today it was 112 in the shade here. On some days like this, as you go through the afternoon, all you can think of is how nice it would be if the afternoon could be over really quickly and things could cool down in the evening. You start wishing your time away. That's when you've got to stop and think: This is your opportunity to practice. You don't know how much longer you've got.

So even on days like this, you have to take advantage of the fact that at least you're alive. You can still focus on your breath, you can still focus on whatever your topic of meditation might be, and appreciate the fact that you still have the breath coming in, going out, that you can focus on, that you can use it to train the mind. Think about the things that are still bearable, still tolerable in spite of the heat. If there are cooler parts of the body—the water element in the body—you can focus on that, wherever you find a cooler sensation. Or focus on the breath. Think of the breath surrounding the body. When you get really into the breath, you start forgetting about the heat. You realize that the opportunities for practice are still here and you want to make the most of them. If you don't make the most of them, then when your time is up, you'll regret all the wasted time you could have used to develop the skills that would hold you in good stead as you're facing the pains of aging, the pains of illness, the pains of death.

We don't like to think about the death, but as the Buddha said, mindfulness of death or recollection of death leads to the deathless. So when he has you think about death, it's not to get you depressed or discouraged. It's to encourage you to realize that there's work to be done, this is as good a time as any to do it, and only when you do the work can you reach the deathless.

There's that verse in the Dhammapada: "Heedfulness is the path to the deathless. Heedlessness is the path to death. The heedful never die. The heedless are as if already dead." If you're sitting in a hot afternoon thinking about when would this time pass really quickly so that you can get through it, it's as if you're dead. You're not taking advantage of the opportunity you have right here, right now, to develop some really important qualities of mind.

So always keep this point in mind as you find yourself trying to rush through certain parts the day, saying, "Let's get this over with really fast until it gets more

tolerable.” Well, you get it over, get it over and over and whoops, there it goes. Your whole life is over. You want to make the most of each moment, but that doesn’t mean squeezing as much pleasure out of the moment as you can. It means using the opportunity to develop good qualities of the mind.

One of the customs of the noble ones is to delight in developing and to delight in abandoning. You develop mindfulness, you develop heedfulness, you develop skillfulness. That’s a good use of your time. You abandon sensual desire, ill will, torpor and lethargy, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty. That’s a good use of your time.

One of the worst things that can hit at the moment of death is a sense of regret: all those opportunities you had to do good and you didn’t take advantage of them. Your guarantee against that is to make the most of your time, even when it’s difficult, even when there’s hardship. You don’t want your goodness to depend on nice conditions. You want it to be there despite difficult conditions, something you can depend on regardless of what the weather is like, what other people are like, what happens to society. This is your real protection, this solidity of the mind. So make the mind dependable.

As you keep digging deeper and deeper in the meditation, there does come a point where you find the opening to the deathless. But it’s only through this ability to dig regardless of the conditions. That’s why the Buddha says that mindfulness of death leads to the deathless. People who don’t like to think about death are the ones who are dying all the time. There are some people who are afraid that if they think about death too much, it’s like putting a hex on themselves, but that’s not the case at all. It’s the people who are constantly aware of the possibility of death, who realize that you really have to prepare for it and that you *can* prepare for it: Those are the ones who can go beyond death.

There’s a skill to dying, because when that moment comes, you suddenly find you can’t stay in the body, and the mind will go with a particular mood. It’ll actually have a vision, like a dream that appears. And there won’t be just one—many will come. One of the skills we learn in meditation, of course, is to say No to vagrant thoughts that come through the mind, and that will be a good skill to have: the ability to step back from a thought and not go jumping into it. So you can take a step back and say, “I don’t have to go there”—especially if it’s a thought of regret, a thought of remorse, fear, surprise.

It’s good not to be surprised by death when it comes, because if you’re too surprised, there’s also going to be the feeling of: “Why so soon? It’s not right! I have so much more life to live.” Well, you don’t at that point. “But I should have more life!” Well, what kind of should is that?

You have to put those thoughts aside and focus on, “Okay, the time has come. It’s time to do it right. Let’s show what we’ve learned from the meditation.” That attitude will see you through. And remember that you’ve got these skills you developed as a meditator. Those are the skills you need at that point. If you’re really skillful, you won’t have to come back. But at the very least, you want to be able to come back to a situation where you can continue to practice.

Think about the situation we have now, where we can practice. The conditions may not be totally ideal, but they are good, they are sufficient. There are a lot of people who don’t have these kinds of conditions—because they didn’t prepare them.

And we do prepare our next life with our actions now. As the Buddha said, when you go to the next life, your good actions are there to receive you like relatives who are receiving a long-lost relative who has finally come home. So even though you’re going to a strange new place, your good actions make it feel like coming home. If there are nothing but bad mental qualities to receive you, it’s not like coming home at all. It’s like going to totally strange place where nobody is friendly.

So the very least you want to develop the qualities that create a good place to come back home to. Or better yet, put the mind to a strong position where it doesn’t have to go anywhere at all at that point, doesn’t feel the need to latch on to anything. But that can be done only if you develop good qualities now.

So appreciate the opportunity you have to do things now. Each time you breathe in, breathe out, as the Buddha said, the heedful person is one who says, “May I live for one more breath so that I can practice the teachings. I could accomplish a lot.” That’s what it means to be heedful. Regard each breath as an opportunity to practice, an opportunity to develop the mind. Whether it’s sitting here meditating or working around the monastery or doing good in other ways, each breath is going to be expended anyhow, so you might as well expend it in something good, something worthwhile, something of solid value.

As the Buddha said, all skillfulness comes from heedfulness. That’s an important teaching. Heedfulness is the root of all skillful behavior. Notice what he’s *not* saying. He’s not saying that our good behavior comes from our natural goodness, our Buddha nature, our innate worthwhile qualities, or our innate nature. The Buddha doesn’t assume innate nature at all. There are just qualities that come and go in the mind. Sometimes they’re good, sometimes they’re not, but heedfulness is the quality that makes you realize, “I’ve got to work on developing the good qualities and abandoning the unskillful ones right now.” You realize you do have the choice, and the choice makes a difference. So you want to

make sure you make the right choice, right now, right now, every right now. That's how skillfulness gets developed in the mind. If you assume that goodness is innate to you, you're not going to have that sense of urgency. You get complacent. But when you start seeing your skillful qualities run out on you, what would you do then?

Skillful qualities have to be nurtured. As long as you haven't reached stream-entry—actually seeing the deathless in your own awareness, or as they say, touching the deathless with your body: As long as you haven't had that experience, you're still uncertain. Your mind is uncertain; your future is uncertain. The Buddha doesn't make any guarantees. It's only with stream-entry that he starts guaranteeing that you've reached a foothold in crossing the river. In other words, you've finally reached the point where your feet can reach the bottom of the river and you're much less likely to be swept away.

And at some point you're guaranteed to get up on the bank, where you're totally free from all the dangers that the river can sweep down at you, all the underwater logs that could hit you in the ribcage, all the weird animals, all the whirlpools, all the other things that a river can do to you. But if you reach the point where your feet can reach the riverbed, you're right next to the shore and you've reached a great deal of safety.

Until that point, though, there are no guarantees. And even with people who've reached stream-entry, the Buddha says you've got to be heedful. Because even though the stream enterers are guaranteed no more than seven lifetimes and nothing lower than the human realm, still the human realm can be pretty miserable. And seven lifetimes can contain a lot of stress and suffering.

So as the Buddha said, just as the footprint of the elephant can contain the other footprints of all the other animals that walk on land, in the same way, heedfulness contains all skillful qualities within it. This is why we think about death: to spark our heedfulness so that we can get on the path to the deathless. We want to be the sort of person who, by thinking about death, goes beyond death. Otherwise, if you refuse to think about death, you're just going to keep on dying over and over and over again.

So it's up to you to choose which path you're going to follow, whether you want to be the sort of person who never dies or the sort of person who's already dead. You do have the choice, and everything depends on the choices you make. It's right here in the present moment we make our choices, which is that's why recollection of death keeps our awareness focused right here. With each breath we have the opportunity to practice the Buddha's teachings and accomplish a great deal.