

Matters of Life & Death

February 25, 2010

A passage we frequently chant is: “I am subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death.” The Thai translation is interesting. It says, “Aging is normal. Illness is normal. Death is normal.” Yet we act as if these things were not normal. They break into our regular lives and don’t have a right to be there. They get in the way of what we want out of life. They get in the way of our plans and our expectations. If that’s our attitude, we’re going to suffer a lot when these things come, as they inevitably will, because they are normal.

So the most important training we can take on is the training that teaches how to face aging without suffering, how to face illness without suffering, how to face death without suffering. We want to keep these things in mind without getting morbid, without getting depressed, but at the same time being very honestly aware that these really are major dangers in our life.

The commentary, when it defines the word *bhikkhu*, or monk, defines it as someone who sees danger. And whether you’re actually ordained or not, the important thing is that you actually see the dangers in life and you prepare for them. It’s as if someone were to go down to the South Pole and not prepare for the cold. That’s the way most of us live our lives. “Oops, here comes aging. Oops, here comes illness. Oh my gosh, here comes death.” What’s really surprising is that *we’re* surprised by these things. Part of the reason is our culture, which wants to make us forget them. And part of it is plain old human nature, as it is around the world. Even in Buddhist cultures, people can get very oblivious to the fact that they’re going to age, grow ill, and die, but at least they have a handle on it, much more than we tend to have here in the West.

So it’s important that we think about these things and learn *how* to think about these things: that they can be prepared for and that there’s a skillful way of handling them. An important part of this is not getting intoxicated with youth, with health, or with life. In other words, while we have these strengths, we have to remind ourselves that they’re not going to last forever. We’ve got to learn how to use them wisely.

Like that feature in *The Onion*, the point and counterpoint. The old man writing the article is saying that youth is wasted on the young, and the young person writing it response, saying that prescription drugs are wasted on the old. It’s really deluded, really intoxicated, literally, that second idea.

There's the Nathaniel Hawthorne story about the old people who complain about, gee, if they only had their youth back again, they wouldn't waste it with running around doing frivolous things. Then they get a magic elixir that actually returns youth to them for a while, and of course they start behaving in same old stupid way they did when they were young. That's the way most of us are. Age doesn't automatically bring wisdom. At the same time, though, youth doesn't automatically bring foolishness. We can take our youth, to the extent that we still have it, and devote it to the practice.

The Buddha has a passage where he talks about future dangers, reflecting on the fact that you're now young, you're strong and healthy, you're still alive. But the time will come when these strengths will pass. So you want to develop the quality of mind that will serve you as a refuge when you're old, when you're ill, when you're dying. This is why we meditate with so much emphasis on developing mindfulness, concentration, and discernment.

Mindfulness is not being aware. It's keeping certain things in mind, especially keeping in mind the idea that you really have to develop skillful qualities if you want to be safe. The Buddha talks about the self as being its own refuge. You have to *make* yourself into a refuge, learning how to build on the strengths you've got and consolidate them.

So when unskillful qualities come up in the mind, you don't just sit there and watch them or indulge them or play around them. You've got to realize: "This is a danger. This could get me in real trouble if I give in to it. If I'm used to giving in to my unskillful qualities, then when the time comes that I can't afford that, what am I going to do?" Say, when pain comes, with the restrictions of aging, or the pain of illness, how are you going to keep from getting upset about it?

One way is to remind yourself that the pain may be in the body, but it doesn't have to be in the mind. The restrictions may be in the body, but the mind doesn't have to be restricted. There are still areas in which the mind can find true happiness. You find it within. This is what the concentration provides, which is why it's not a waste of time when you do find pleasure in the concentration, that you learn how to maintain it. It's a balancing act, learning how to stay there and not disturb it.

It's as if you find yourself floating, and it feels just right. There's a weightlessness, a lightness to the body, a lightness to the mind. The mind can comment in all kinds of ways. It can say, "Oh my gosh, it's wonderful. How do I keep this going? Isn't this great? Or what's next?" Either way, you disturb the balance. It's a very precise balance, and you have to learn how to just be with it with only a minimum amount of comment, just enough to remind yourself to stay

with this, stay with this, learn how to keep it going, notice the slightest little disturbance that would knock it out of balance and just drop it. Whatever thought comes into the mind that disturbs the balance, just drop it, drop it, drop it.

This is where you have to learn how to strip away all the Velcro of your thoughts, so that they don't stick, they don't grab you. A thought can come, and you find that if you don't grab it, it can just go right past you. It's not going to disturb the balance. That's the kind of solidity you want in your concentration. That takes practice.

So it's not a waste of time to hang out in those pleasurable states. Notice what the breath is like when it's really pleasurable. There will be a sense of fullness, a sense of ease in the breathing. Note that fact. There will be a sense that you really don't have to do that much to the breath after all.

Once you get that sense of the right touch, the light touch, that keeps you balanced, then even though there may be pains in different parts of the body, you don't have to focus on them. You can stay with that sense of ease, that sense of easiness that comes when everything is balanced.

You begin to realize that it'll depend less and less and less on how things are going in the body. In the beginning, it's like practicing a musical instrument. You've got to find really a quiet place where conditions are ideal so that you don't get distracted. But if you want to perform, you have to be able to perform in an auditorium where there are lot of people, lots of distractions, and of course your self-consciousness suddenly comes to the fore. You have to learn how to put that aside so that you're just there with the music. In the same way, you're just going to be here with the sense of ease despite other sensations in the body, despite other things happening around you or thoughts welling up in the mind. It's a skill that you've got to develop.

And in developing the skill, you're developing your discernment, knowing what you should focus on, what you should let go. The meditation is practice in learning how to let go, let go, let go, of different thoughts that come up, the different concerns that come up, the chatter in the mind that gets worried about things needlessly. You sit here and your circulation gets cut off in your legs: Is that going to paralyze your legs? Well, no, you learn that it doesn't.

The same with all the other worries that come up. Sometimes there's the worry that comes when you find the breath getting really refined. It seems as if it's going to stop. So there's that fear: What happens if the breath stops? Well, you're not going to die. In the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation, you learn how to calm bodily fabrication, which is your in-and-out breath, and you calm mental

fabrications, which are perceptions, and feelings. These perceptions are going to be the big thing you've got to learn how to deal with. As you grow old, there will be the perception of your getting old. As you're sick, there's the perception of illness. And you begin to realize that just carrying those perceptions around is a real burden. If you have practice in meditation, you learn you can put aside those perceptions, any perception that comes up that's going to burden the mind and not be used for any useful purpose. You can learn how to put it down, put it down, let it go, let it pass.

You begin to realize that this sense of balance you have in the mind which seems very fragile in the beginning and seems almost so light that you can't really grab on to it, but it's there: You learn how to maintain that balance without grabbing. That's something that's going to be your mainstay, your nourishment, as the body begins to fall apart. As you suffer aging, illness, death, and separation, you still have this to come back to. And you find that it's sustaining.

In the beginning it doesn't seem like much, because it's still just getting started, but as you stick with it, you find it really does provide you with respite, provide you with a place you can rest, gather your strength. It becomes what they call your *vihāra-dhamma*, a home for the mind. After all, this body that you're living in right now can't be your home forever. We get used to it, thinking, "This is me, this is mine." But there will come a time you get tired of just carrying it around.

A couple of weeks back during the Saturday morning session, one of the members of the group commented that she's going to be turning 80 next week. She's beginning to contemplate the end of her life. Someone said, "Oh, no, my mother has lived to past 100. You could live another 20 years." And the woman who's going to be celebrating her 80th birthday said, "Don't put a curse on me. I don't want to live that long."

The body gets less and less responsive, more and more of a burden. This happens to all of us. It creeps up on us. The body doesn't ask permission. It just starts falling apart here, falling apart there. You think, "Maybe if I eat a special diet and exercise a special way, I can keep it going." And you can push against the tendency to some extent, but then the body just decides on some other way to fail you. You have to realize, aging is normal. It's not a failing. Illness is normal. It's not a failing. Death, when it comes, it's not a failing. It's normal.

If you can keep your mind normal in the face of that—with this balance, with this sense of precision in knowing what to focus on, what to allow yourself to think, what to allow yourself to put aside—that skill is going to be your refuge. It'll carry you not only through the aging, but also through the whole dying process—and then the birth that will come after it. Or if are you really skilled, you

won't have to come back. It would just be the end. The end of what? It's not the end of you, although your sense of you will go. But it won't be the end of awareness. It'll be the end of space and time, but there's still an awareness there.

But for most of us, there will be something that the mind will latch on to, so you've got to train it. As the Buddha said, you're going to latch on to craving: That's what will sustain it from one birth to the next, from one life to the next. So you've got to learn how to look at your cravings and watch out for the ones that are unskillful. At the very least, foster the skillful ones, learn how to recognize them, learn how to strengthen them, so that if you have to grab on to something, grab on to something skillful. Have the determination that you want to go someplace where you can practice, where you can hear the Dhamma, and have an opportunity to practice the Dhamma.

What this means is that you have to train the mind in how to navigate some very narrow passages. It's like a ship that has to go through a very narrow strait. So you try to bring more skill, perception, alertness, to help bring the mind to this balance, which is very light, but as you stick with it, it gets stronger and stronger. Then you can navigate all the dangers, all the rocks and whirlpools and everything, and come through with ease.

People who refuse to think about aging, illness, and death tend to think, "Well when it comes, it's just going to come. There's nothing you can do. Maybe you should shoot me full of drugs, so I don't have to suffer." But when you're in a drugged state, you can't make wise choices. The fact of the matter is, you *can* handle these things skillfully. And you'll need as much mindfulness and alertness concentration and discernment as you can muster. This is why they say—it's a commonplace in Thailand—that when you practice meditation, you're practicing not only how to live, but also how to die, how to face up to all that normal things in life and to handle them with finesse.