

Mindful of Death

April 21, 2012

Breathe deeply to energize the body and to wake up the mind. This is a necessary step in the breath meditation because if you start out with a very relaxed breath, it's easy to drift off. So energize things a little bit. Breathe deeply. Think of the breath going all the way down through your torso, waking up the different elements in the body, and then all the way down the legs. Then allow things to settle down in a way that feels good, feels right.

A lot of the meditation lies in finding a way of breathing, a way of thinking about the breath, that you find interesting, find easy to stay with. Ajaan Lee recommends lots of different ways of thinking about the breath. You try them out and you see what works and what doesn't work. The whole point of concentration practice is to settle down with a sense of well-being, so you try to figure out how to adjust his instructions in a way that gets the results, at the same time is not just simply falling in line with your laziness. That requires a proper balance.

Luang Pu Khamdee, one of the forest ajaans, said that the state of mind you're trying to develop here is like that of a hunter who has to go out and sit very, very still, so as not to scare off the animals. At the same time, though, he has to be very alert. He needs to be very patient. Because after all, you're not making an appointment with the rabbit to come at two in the afternoon. You have no idea when the rabbit's going to come. But you put yourself in a place where it's very likely for the rabbits to come and then you stay there, very still and very alert.

In the same way, you can't make an appointment for insights to arise at a certain time, but you do know that the insights you're looking for will have to arrive here in the present moment, so you place yourself here. You want to be very still right here so that you can see the subtle things that are happening. And you have to be very alert, again, to see the subtle things that are happening. That requires the proper balance between being energized and being calm, being very still and very sensitive.

Ajaan Suwat would often talk about making the mind strong and gentle at the same time. Strong in the sense that you're not going to let yourself be knocked off the theme of your meditation. No matter what comes up, you're going to stay with the breath. Even if you're dealing with feelings or

mind states, you want them to be related to the fact that you're staying with the breath as your anchor in the present moment.

At the same time, though, you want to be gentle in the sense of being very sensitive to what's going on. You're trying to be sensitive not just to enjoy the subtleties of the present moment, but also because there's important work to be done here. There are important things to understand about what's going on in the mind, because the processes that are playing out here play out in the larger realm as well. You get to see the mind as it thirsts after things. As we chanted just now, we tend to be a slave to craving. We take the slavery so for granted that we hardly even notice it. So now's a chance to watch it, with the purpose of freeing ourselves from it.

We cling to things. As we were saying earlier today, the relationship between craving and clinging is like that between thirst and feeding. You feel a lack and then you look for something to fill up the lack. Often, you grab hold of whatever you find. Most of us are like little children who have no idea what's really good food and what's poisonous or what's neither food or poison—just not food, like stones and things. A child puts anything it sees into its mouth. We want to learn how to get some control over that, get some wisdom with regard to that: What things do you want to take as your nourishment?

As we're focusing here in the present moment, it's to see processes that are bigger than the present moment as well. They can be found here, they can be seen here, but they're going to play out in larger realms as well. The way the mind relates to itself in a simple activity like this tells you a lot about how it's going to relate to other things in life.

It's like a custom they had in the old days. When I was still a layperson, I was at an antique shop one day in Chang Mai, and there were all these carrying poles that were very elaborate. As you know, in Thailand they carry things on their shoulders with one load in front and one load in back, balanced on a pole over your shoulder. All the poles I had seen until then were pretty ordinary, but these were very artistically done. So I asked the person running the store what these were for.

She said that back in the old days when you went to the monastery to take your alms food, you'd carry it over your shoulder. If a young man was interested in a young woman, he would carve a pole for her to use for that purpose. She'd take one look at the carving and she'd know what kind of person he was. The way he carved, the style, the craftsmanship, would tell her a lot about how he would approach other things.

It's the same with the way you relate to the present moment here. It tells you a lot about how you're going to relate to other things in life.

So the ramifications go out. Try to be very precise, very observant in what you do here. As the Buddha said, he was looking for two things in a student. One is that a student be observant, and two, that the student be honest. You've got to be honest about what you're doing. The mind does have this tendency to lie to itself. You tell yourself, "I'm here with the breath," and then you're wandering off someplace else before you even know it.

You have to catch yourself as you lie to yourself. You have to be observant. Make up your mind that you really are going to stay here for the breath, and you really are going to look into what kind of breathing feels good right now: what works and what doesn't work in getting the mind to settle down. A lot of experimentation is required here.

We'd all like to have a good recipe book for meditation, the kind that's foolproof. But working with the mind is a lot more complicated than working with food. There are some things that you can learn from books, some things you can learn from Dhamma talks, but there's an awful lot that has to be learned from your own practice—from your being honest and observant.

And the Buddha recommends not only that you focus on the breath, but that you also bring in other themes when necessary. If you find yourself getting a little lackadaisical or careless about the practice, one of the themes he recommends is you think about the fact of death.

For most of us, death is a scary thought. We like to push it away, but that of course doesn't push death itself away. It just makes us stupid. You remember the philosopher—I've forgotten which one it was—who said that the beginning of wisdom comes from your realization of death. It forces you to ask some questions about your life: "What kind of life do I want to live, given the fact that it's going to end?"

The Buddha has you think about that. Each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, you can remind yourself, "May I live just for this one more breath so that I can accomplish a lot in the practice." When we talk about appreciating the present moment, that's what we should appreciate: that we have this opportunity to train the mind, to see it more clearly, to develop skillful qualities and drop unskillful ones. That would be the proper reason for treasuring this breath as it comes in, this breath as it goes out, and the next one, and the next one, however many you get. You want

to appreciate each one for the opportunities it supplies. Because as you look into the present moment, you see a lot of the issues that will come into play when death comes. After all, where is it going to come? It's going to come right here. *When*, you don't know, but you do know where. It's going to be right here: wherever the mind and the body meet here at the breath.

So you want to get to know this place really well. It's like knowing that someone's planning to mug you down on a certain street corner. You go down and you check the street corner to see how you can avoid the mugger and, at the very least, minimize the amount of suffering.

The Buddha says to think about the fact that death could come at any time. Then you ask yourself, "Okay, what unfinished business do I have? Are there still unskillful thoughts in my mind?" If you notice that there are attitudes of greed, aversion, delusion, or any of the reasons why you might fear death, he says to work on them as quickly and with the same sense of urgency and mindfulness that a person whose head was on fire would try to put out the fire.

Notice: He mentions mindfulness there. Mindfulness is not just a nice accepting state that's going to watch the flames and see how beautiful they are as your hair burns. Your hair is burning. You've got to put it out. The mindfulness, your ability to keep things in mind, is what keeps you focused on the fact that this is the most important thing to focus on taking care of right now. If you've got unskillful states in your mind, you've got to work on them.

Of the reasons you might fear death, the Buddha lists four. One is attachment to the body, identifying this body as yourself, the fear that you would go out of existence when this body goes. Two, there's attachment to sensuality, all the pleasures you can think of here in the human realm that you'd hate to leave. Three, there'd be the knowledge you have done harmful things to other people, and there's the fear that you might get punished on the other side. And then four, there's doubt about the True Dhamma: Did the Buddha really know what he was talking about? Is there a deathless element in the mind? Is there not? Can you find it through your own efforts? If you're not sure about that, death is a very scary prospect.

So those are the things you've got to work on. See where you're attached to the body, where you identify with it. As the Buddha said, learn to regard it as not being worthy of calling it your self. He doesn't say there is no self, but he does say that you can't really own the body. It doesn't really belong to you. Of course, he doesn't say there is a self either. But he

does want you to look at the way you identify with things. That's something you can observe right here, right now. There are states of mind that don't latch on to the body, that don't identify with it. Can you nurture those?

The same with sensuality: This is one of the reasons why we work on developing a sense of well-being that comes from getting the mind to settle down here in this sense of the body as you feel it from within. That gives rise to a pleasure that allows you to let go of your sensual pleasures. It puts you in a position where you can look at their drawbacks and see that you really don't want to identify with that kind of pleasure. If all you see is the pleasure that comes from sensuality, if you think that that's the only alternative to pain, you're not going to look at the drawbacks of that pleasure. You won't want to let go. But if you see that there is a higher level of pleasure, a higher level of well-being, then you can taste it and draw on it when you need it. That makes it a lot easier for you to look at the drawbacks of the pleasures of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and especially the pleasure of just fantasizing and obsessing about what kind of pleasure you want out of those things.

You can see the drawbacks and realize that that's not where you find true satisfaction. When you can let go of those two things—your attachment to the body and your attachment to sensual pleasures—death is a lot less scary.

As for the fear that comes from knowing you've done unskillful things, the Buddha says to do skillful things and focus on those. The recollection of your virtue, the recollection of your generosity: These are really sustaining for the mind. You can see this even as you sit here and meditate. There are times when the meditation is not going well and you start thinking, "I just don't have it. I don't have the potential." But then you can recollect times when you've been generous even though you didn't have to be; times when you could have gotten away with harming other people, but you didn't. You realize that you do have worth as a human being. That recollection can be sustaining.

The Buddha wasn't the sort of person who would say, "When you give something, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing," because that's almost as if you were ashamed to be generous. Now, you don't go around bragging about it, but at the same time you remind yourself, "This is the sign of a noble human being." There's dignity in being generous, dignity in being virtuous, and you've got that. That's a sustaining

thought.

As for the last reason for fearing death—not knowing the True Dhamma—the only way you’re going to get past that one is to meditate really seriously and see if what the Buddhas say about true happiness is really true. Can you find it through your own efforts? The only way you’re going to be able to overcome that doubt is to actually taste that happiness for yourself.

So here’s your opportunity. You’ve got this breath. Remind yourself, “May I live for the interval of one in-and-out breath so I can accomplish much in terms of the Buddha’s teachings.” That way of thinking about death is not depressing. It’s actually energizing. You’ve got something valuable right here: You’ve got this breath coming in and going out, and there’s a lot that can be done with this breath coming in and going out—a lot to be learned both about the body and the mind, a lot that can be made more skillful in terms of the mind.

So take advantage of this while you’ve got it.