

Fear of Death

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The Buddha's decision to go off into the forest started with his realization that he was subject to aging, illness, and death, and yet these were the things in which he had been searching for happiness. We, too, are subject to aging, illness, and death, and we tend to search for our happiness in things that age, grow ill, and die as well. He, however, wanted a happiness that was better than that, something that was more reliable. This desire was what underlay all of his efforts: to find a happiness that would not age, would not grow ill, and would not die. Of course, all of his friends and his family told him that that was impossible. But he decided that life would not be worth living unless he gave it a try. So he worked hard for six years, going down some dead-end paths, finding himself in blind alleys, but finally he found the path that led to a happiness that did not grow ill, did not age, and did not die. That's what he taught for the rest of his life. That path—the noble eightfold path—was his first teaching, and it was one of his last teachings as well.

Prominent in the path is right effort, the kind of effort that leads to the type of happiness that he had been looking for. It starts with desire: generating desire, upholding your intent to let go of unskillful qualities that have arisen, to prevent unskillful qualities that have not arisen from arising, to give rise to skillful qualities, and to maintain them and bring them to their culminations. Desire is what animates those activities.

Notice that these efforts are internal activities. These qualities are qualities of the mind. They will manifest themselves outside—in your thoughts, words, and deeds—but they come from within, so that's where the main effort is focused. This is why the section of the noble eightfold path that deals with concentration starts with right effort: the effort to give rise to skillful qualities, like mindfulness, alertness, discernment. These are the things that are really going to help you. Even if you don't make it all the way to nibbana, these qualities will stand by you as the body ages, as it grows ill, as it dies. One of the discoveries the Buddha made on the night of his Awakening was that things don't end with death. There is a carryover. But it's not the body that carries over. It's qualities of the mind.

He called these qualities noble treasures—things like conviction in the principle of action, the belief that all of your intentional actions will bear fruit in line with the quality of the intention; virtue; a sense of shame at the idea of doing evil things; a sense of compunction or fear of the consequences of doing evil

things; a desire for learning; the ability to relinquish what gets in the way of your path; and discernment. These seven qualities are called noble treasures because, as the Buddha said, fire can't burn them, thieves and kings can't steal them, death can't kill them, water can't wash them away.

So death is not the end. Some things carry over, but you have to focus your energies on the mind if you want to have good things to carry over. Otherwise the things you carry over are bad.

This is why our effort here is aimed in two directions. One, if you can gain total release, this is the path to total release. Two, if you don't gain total release within this lifetime, you've got things to carry over as you continue your quest in your next lifetime. But you have to desire those qualities. Otherwise it's hard to gain them, for they do require work. We may be attracted to the idea of a path that doesn't require any action or effort at all, but it doesn't work that way. The path of inaction just goes in the general way that water goes—downhill—developing bad qualities to carry over, whereas the path that goes uphill requires effort.

Right effort doesn't require that you kill yourself or exhaust yourself, but it does require an *appropriate* effort, whatever is required to get past unskillful qualities and give rise to skillful ones. There are times when it requires a lot of concerted effort. Other times, it requires just the ability to sit and watch. But it's always a focused effort, an appropriate effort, whatever the situation demands.

It's built on the desire to find something that goes beyond aging, illness, and death, something you can really rely on. To help generate that desire, the Buddha has us look long and hard at aging, illness, and death—and at our fear of these things. He says that our fear of death is based on four things. Either we're attached to the body, we're attached to sensual pleasures, we realize that we've done cruel and harmful things to other people, or we haven't yet seen the true Dhamma, that there really is a deathless. A lot of our meditation is aimed at overcoming those four reasons for fear.

For example, the realization that we've done cruel things in the past: The Buddha doesn't have us get tied up in remorse. The principle of kamma, which sometimes sounds deterministic, is actually a very fluid and complex process, one with room for making changes in the present moment. One of the things you *can* do to counteract the harmful effects from unskillful things you've done in the past is to develop an attitude of goodwill for all beings without limit. The Buddha calls it an expansive mind state. When painful things happen in an expansive mind state, the impact is much different from things happening in a narrow and confined mind state. The image he gives is of a lump of salt placed in water. If you put the lump of salt in a glass of water, the water becomes unfit to drink. If you put it in a broad, clean river, the water in the river is still fit to drink

because there's so much more water compared to the salt. So the Buddha recommends that you develop an attitude of goodwill for all beings, both because it counteracts the effects of bad actions in the past, and because it prevents you from acting on unskillful intentions now and into the future. If you really feel goodwill for all, there's no way you can intentionally harm them. You don't have to like all beings; you simply decide that you don't want to cause them suffering. You don't want to take pleasure in their suffering.

As you think about it, what good do you get out of other people's suffering? You don't gain anything at all. There may be a sense of *schadenfreude*, but that's pretty miserable food for the mind. It's better to realize that if all the cruel and heartless people in the world had a true sense of happiness, they wouldn't do cruel and heartless things anymore. So the desire for goodwill sets your attitude straight on how the world would actually become a better place for everyone: You're wishing that people would understand how to be truly happy, so that they'd stop doing cruel and heartless things. Goodwill also puts you in a position where your true happiness doesn't have to conflict with the true happiness of other people. So this is one way of counteracting that particular reason for fear.

As for attachment to the body and to sensual pleasures, the Buddha has a double-pronged attack. One prong is to see the drawbacks of being attached to these things. If you're attached to the body, where is it going to take you? It's going to take you to aging, illness, and death, for sure, no matter how much you exercise or beautify the body. It may take you to other places in the meantime, but the ultimate end is something we all share, and we all know for sure that it's going to happen.

The same holds true for sensual pleasures. Where are the sensual pleasures you were enjoying last week? Right now all you have is a memory of them. Sometimes that memory is tainted by the realization that you did unskillful things in order to gain those pleasures or to keep them. Not only do they tend to slip away on their own, there are also times when other people want what you've got and they're going to fight you for it. So you have to fight them off. The Buddha illustrates this point with the image of a hawk that has found a little lump of meat. As soon as it tries to carry it off, other birds are going to come and attack it. Then there's the image of a man sitting up in a fruit tree, enjoying the fruit in the tree, but another man comes along with a hatchet. Instead of climbing the tree to get the fruit, he uses the hatchet to cut the tree down. If the man in the tree doesn't come down right away, he's going to get hurt. That's what looking for happiness in sensual pleasures does to you. It leaves you exposed on all sides to danger.

This is why the Buddha recommends right concentration as the second prong in his attack, to provide you with an alternative source for happiness so that

you're not so hungry for sensual pleasures. You can sit here and bathe the body in a sense of ease, in a sense of rapture, simply by focusing on the breath, adjusting the breath so that it's comfortable, and no one is going to try to steal it from you. Once it really feels good, you can just settle in, letting the breath bathe you on all sides, coming in and out all of the pores of the skin, allowing that sense of ease and rapture to suffuse the whole body. As you get really adept at this, your attachment to sensual pleasures begins to loosen, for you see that this is a much better pleasure. It's more intense, more pervasive, more reliable, less blameworthy, and a lot less dangerous. So right concentration, in a very direct way, is one of the ways of overcoming fear of death, because you realize that you have an alternative source of pleasure.

But the ultimate step in overcoming fear of death lies in seeing the true Dhamma. This means realizing that there is something deathless that can be touched by the mind right where you've been experiencing the body. It comes not just through concentration, but also through working on the opportunities for insight that the concentration provides. As the mind gets more and more still, you begin to see the mind's attachments. You can see them as activities. Even its sense of itself, or your sense of yourself, is just a series of strategies you've devised.

The Buddha calls these strategies the process of "I-making" and "my-making." Whatever way you form a sense of self around form, feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, or consciousness, it's all just fabrication. In the process of fabrication there's stress. If that's all there were in life, you'd be willing to put up with the stress, for without your self-strategies there would be no way to find happiness. But the Buddha says that there's more. If you can learn how to deconstruct all those fabrications, all the stories and ideas, the things you build around your sense of who you are and who other people are and what the world is: If you can learn to deconstruct those things, you find a greater happiness, one that doesn't die.

That's what right mindfulness and right concentration are for: to provide you with a framework in which you can do the deconstruction. The deconstruction is the four noble truths, just looking at things in terms of stress, the cause of stress, what you're doing to put an end to that cause. And the actual end of stress comes as you get more and more precise, more and more skillful at following the path. Your precision and skill lead you to detect even more and more subtle levels of fabrication going on in the mind. When you see the stress that comes with even the subtlest fabrication, and see that you also have the choice not to fabricate—that whatever gratification you got from the fabrication just can't compare with the sense of ease that comes from dropping that particular level of fabrication—

the mind will be willing to let go, willing to stop. In this way it peels these levels of fabrication away in the same way as you'd peel away the layers of an onion.

When all intention finally ends, that's when you realize that there is something deathless. The Buddha was right. There is something that can be touched in the mind that doesn't require fabrication—in fact it's totally unfabricated. It has nothing to do with time or space or anything that can age, grow ill, or die at all. It's just there. It can't be touched by the vagaries of time, but it *can* be touched by undoing the patterns of intention and fabrication in the mind.

Once you've touched that, you realize that there is something that doesn't die. It has nothing to do with you, although it was through your activities and intentions—skillful intentions that took apart your other intentions—that you got to the point where you could realize this. Because there's no need to strategize in there, there's no self that comes with the felt need to strategize, or the felt need to partake of the happiness. The happiness is just there. You don't need a "you" to create it or to partake of it. Once you've seen that, that's what really gets you beyond fear of death, for the part that doesn't die is much more worthwhile than the things that do.

Right now these are all just ideas, possibilities, for people who are still struggling to get on the path. But it's important to have a sense of what's possible, because that expands your imagination. As your imagination gets expanded, your desires change as well. If you think the deathless is impossible, your desires are going to focus on things that can die. But if you open up to the possibility that there is a deathless that can be attained through human effort, it's a challenge. Hopefully, it stirs some desire to follow the path, to test if what the Buddha said is really true.

So keep this possibility in mind, because this is what gives energy to the desire to stick with right effort, to stick with the path, so that the deathless is not just an idea or news of somebody else's claims. Ultimately it becomes an actual experience based on your actual efforts. It's not just news about what somebody else did in the past. It's your news. Of course, nobody else has to know. As the chant says, it's *paccattam*, something that each person can experience only for him or herself. But when it becomes a reality in your mind, it makes a huge change. Aging, illness, and death don't hold any fear. As one of the texts says, you attain something that allows you to live in peace, ease, and bliss, even when you're old, even when you're sick, even when you die. And that's a possibility really worth exploring.