

Survival Tactics

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You know the passage where the Buddha says that heedlessness is the path to death? When you're sloppy and careless, you die. He's not talking only about physical survival, although that is an important consideration and many people do die because of their own carelessness. But here he's talking more about the survival of the mind, the good qualities in your mind. When you're careless, the good qualities in your mind die. And when they die, what do you have left? There may be brute survival of the body, but it's not worth all that much.

When we come to practice the Buddha's teachings, we're basically learning survival techniques for the mind, how to keep the mind's good qualities going strong. Observing the precepts, practicing concentration, developing discernment: those are the tactics. The meditation we're doing right now: that's a survival tactic for the mind. Both on the everyday level and at the moment of death, the tactics you learn, the techniques you learn while you're meditating, are going to stand you in good stead.

The steps we have here – focusing on the breath, making it comfortable, spreading it throughout the body, allowing it to grow calm to the point where there's a sense of ease and rapture – the beginning stages of breath meditation: these are useful not only on the cushion or your meditation seat, but also in daily life. In other words, by focusing on the breath you keep the mind in the present moment because that's an important place to stay. That's where all your decisions are being made. All your kamma is being created right here in the present moment. If you're not here, a lot of things get decided on a subconscious level, on a reactive level, while you're off someplace else. These are the forces shaping your life, and yet you're not watching over them.

So the first thing is to bring yourself into the present moment. And then you create a sense of ease and wellbeing in the present moment as well, one that helps you stay there and at the same time gives the mind something to feed on. Ultimately, of course, we want to get the mind to a place where it doesn't have to feed, but in the meantime it has to feed on something. So you give it something good to feed on: the sense of wellbeing you create simply by breathing in in a way that feels good, breathing out in a way that feels good, so your mind doesn't go off feeding on things outside: what this person said, what that person did. That kind of stuff is junk food. It may be fun to feed on but it doesn't give the

mind any nourishment. It actually saps your strength. Like fast food: it may taste good for a while, but there's so much cholesterol in it that over the long term it turns to sludge in your arteries and clogs them up.

The normal things the mind tends to feed on in the course of the day – this person's actions, that person's words – are junk food for the mind. But when the mind has something really good to feed on, right here in the present moment, it doesn't want to feed outside. Things can pass right by you. You see other people's words, their actions, and they just go right past you, in the sense that they don't come in and wound the mind. You see them clearly – it's not that you're oblivious to these things – and you can make good choices on what to do when someone else does something harmful or makes a mistake. But it doesn't wound the mind, because you haven't taken it in.

Most of us are like little children: anything that gets near your mouth, you just swallow it right down – rocks, bits of glass, insects and dirt. And when they harm you, you go and complain about what other people are doing. Well it's your fault that you went and swallowed the stuff down in the first place.

So if you give the mind something good to feed on – like the comfortable sensation of the breath coming in and going out – the mind has a good source of nourishment. As it gets a taste of comfort, you begin to notice when it's not comfortable. Often that discomfort is associated with unskillful states of mind arising: anger, greed, jealousy, fear. These things will cause a change in the breath. If you're there with the breath and you're used to having it comfortable, you notice these changes immediately. They'll alert you to the fact that something's gone wrong in the mind. Again, for most of us, we're off someplace else when these things begin to take a foothold in the mind. By the time we realize it, they've taken over. They kill off whatever goodness we may have.

That's why heedlessness is the path to death. You get careless about what's happening in the mind, and then all sorts of things can start coming in. But when you're right there, sensitive to the slightest little unpleasantness in the breath, it's an alert. It alerts you to when things are happening.

And then what do you do? Another one of the steps we practice here: once the breath is comfortable, you let it spread throughout the body. So you breathe through the uncomfortable breath sensations. Breathe in a way that loosens up the tension in the body accompanying the anger, the fear, or whatever.

You then find yourself in a much better position to act on the situation that got you angry in the first place. You can respond reasonably, wisely, with clarity, because you're not overwhelmed with a sense that you've got to get that tension out of your system – for it's already dissolved out of your system. What's left is the awareness that something should be done, but you now have the space to decide: what should be done? Should it be done right now or later? You can see

much more clearly what the situation is, and what would be the appropriate response.

So these basic steps in breath meditation are very important for daily survival of the goodness of the mind: keeping you in touch with decisions being made in the mind, keeping you in touch with the emotions that are threatening to overcome the mind, and giving you tools to deal with them so that you're in charge.

Even more so, when life comes to an end, the fact that you've developed these skills is going to be very helpful. Most people are overwhelmed by the process of dying. The body, which always used to seem to work all right, suddenly starts malfunctioning. The body, which they identified with, which they've invested so much time and energy in, starts falling apart. They feel lost and betrayed. And then where do they go? For people who don't have any training in meditation, that's a real killer, not only physically but also mentally.

If you've got these skills mastered, you've got a better place for the mind to stay. You can deal with whatever thoughts come up. And all kinds of thoughts are going to come thronging in to your awareness at that point: this regret, that disappointment, this complaint. There's going to be a lot of negative stuff. But if you've got good solid mindfulness and good clear awareness in the present moment, you can just watch these things come and watch them go. You don't have to grab onto them.

If you're really skilled in your meditation, you will have found a place where the present moment opens up into the deathless. Then you're really safe, no matter what happens: the body falls apart, all kinds of things can happen - but there's that secure place. Ajaan Fuang once said that when you're practicing meditation, you're practicing how to die properly. And these skills that we're working on when we're sitting right here, they're your survival skills, both on a day-to-day level and also when the time comes for the mind to separate from the body, to separate from all its mental events, everything associated with this life. If you do it skillfully, the awareness that's left will separate out, will have nothing to worry about, either in the present or on into the future.