

A Refuge from Death

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The Buddha said there are four reasons why people are afraid of death. One is that they're attached to sensual pleasures. They're afraid that at death they'll be deprived of their sensual pleasures. The second is that they're attached to their body. They know that at death they'll have to leave the body. The third is that they've done cruel and harmful things in their lives, and are afraid of the possibility that they may be punished for those cruel and harmful things after death. The fourth is that they have doubts about the true Dhamma. They don't know: "Is death an annihilation, or is it not annihilation? What happens? What is there of lasting value in this life that might be able to survive their death?" They're in doubt about that. So the whole thing is a big mystery, and when it's a mystery, it's scary.

A brahman once went to see the Buddha and said that he didn't think there was anyone in the world who wasn't afraid of death. The Buddha replied that there are people who are not afraid of death. They haven't done anything cruel, they're not attached to the bodies, they're not attached to sensual pleasures, and they've ended their doubts about the true Dhamma.

So this is an important aspect of the practice we're doing, learning how we can overcome our fear of death. This is the way in which the Dhamma offers a refuge. We often think that the Dhamma as a refuge is something outside, the words written in the books that appear in bookcases, but that's just an ancillary refuge. The real refuge, though, is when the Dhamma appears inside, when we practice the Dhamma. Having listened to it, we practice it, and then we attain the Dhamma.

So it's in developing this refuge inside, through the practice of virtue, concentration and discernment: That's what ultimately offers our truest protection. And it takes us beyond fear of death.

Of those four reasons for fear of death, one of them deals with our outside behavior: the way we treat other people, other beings. This is what the precepts are for. You follow the precepts and then you look at your behavior, and you realize that you've done nothing to harm anybody. So there's no fear from that quarter. Even then, though, there's still the possibility you might start thinking about things back on the things you did before you took on the precepts and you have no control over your mind. It's very easy to focus on all the cruel or harmful things you did.

So ultimately, meditation is needed to deal with all four fears.

One, bring your mind under control, so that it doesn't go wandering off into things that are harmful and hurtful.

It's important to remember that when the Buddha talked about precepts, when he talked about karma, he said that thinking back on the bad things you did in the past is useful only when you take it as an incentive not to do those things again. If you start getting tied up in remorse and guilt, he says, that's not helpful at all. No matter how remorseful you are, you can't go back and erase what you did. The remorse actually weakens your mind, so that you don't have the strength to refrain from actions like that in the future.

This requires a certain ability to gain some control over your thoughts. This is why we practice concentration, to keep the mind on one object and give it something good to hold on to, so that it doesn't feel tempted to go wandering off and feeding in its old ways.

So when you find the mind wandering off, bring it back to the breath. If it keeps wandering off, look at the things that you're wandering off to feed on. Look for their drawbacks. When anger comes up, ask yourself: Why are you angry? What do you get out of it? If you look at it with a fair mind, you realize you don't get much. And it's certainly not worth all the trouble it costs the mind. And what would happen if you let yourself think those thoughts of anger for 24 hours? They would just eat away, eat away at your mind, and at the same time you'd get more and more likely to do and say things you'd later regret. Sometimes that realization is enough to help drop the anger.

If that doesn't work, you can consciously ignore the anger. Think of it as being one voice in the committee of your mind, and let it be in the back corner. Don't put it on front stage. In other words, you know it's there, it's chattering away, but you just decide you're not going to focus on it.

If that doesn't work, notice how, when you're thinking, there's tension in the body, there's tension in the mind. It takes energy to keep thinking about things. If you can notice where the tension is, where the effort is, just relax it. Especially if you can sense where in the body there's the tension that corresponds to the thought, just zap the tension, breathe right through it, and the thought doesn't have any foundation. It collapses.

If that doesn't work, then, as the Buddha said, grit your teeth, press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, and just determine that you're going to crush down any thought that has to do with that anger or whatever the distraction is. That's the steamroller approach.

These are the five main ways of dealing with distractions. Avail yourself of all of them, whichever one is needed at any particular time. This way, you gain some control over your mind so that it doesn't go wandering off into things that are harmful. It gets ready to settle down here until finally it's able to develop a sense of ease, and well-being in the present moment. You can adjust the breath in any way you like, so that it feels good to be right here. Adjust your focus so that it's not too heavy—in other words, clamping down on the flow of blood in the body—and it's not so light that it's easily blown away. When you can get a sense of just right, that's the beginning of a sense of refuge inside.

You have a place in the mind where you can go. And even if you don't get any greater insights than this, at least you've got something good to hold on to. When death comes, everything is going to get snatched, snatched, snatched away. What will remain will be just a sense of bare awareness. The closer you can bring your mind to that sense of awareness by making it still, by keeping it bright and clear in the present moment, then when other things get snatched away, you won't feel like you're being snatched away, or that anything really valuable is being snatched away from you.

That provides a lot of protection right there. And it's even better when you've reflected on the body, reflected on the sensual pleasures that you were so attached to. This is why we have that chant on the 32 parts the body that everybody complains so much about. If you hold on to the body, then when the time comes to part, it gets messy. Even before you part, the body gets messy anyhow. You get old. This can't function. That can't function. You can't even wipe yourself. If you're lucky, you have other people to come and care for you. But then you have to put up with their moods and their sense of frustration over the fact that they have to look after you. If you don't have anybody, you lie in your own excrement. It's miserable.

So it's best learn to get some detachment from the body while you're healthy, while you're strong enough, to realize that although the body is useful in many ways, you can't hold on to it as an end in and of itself. Then, when you get a greater sense of the mind as being separate from the body—your awareness is one thing, the body is an object: The stronger you make that awareness and more continuous, you gain a sense that it really is separate.

The image is of a drop of water on the lotus leaf. Have you even seen lotuses in Thailand or Asia? There are these tiny, tiny hairs all over the lotus leaf. You put a drop of water on it, and the hairs are so small that the water can't even seep into the leaf. It just rises as bead over the top of the hairs on the surface of the leaf.

So the awareness is like a drop of water. The body is like the lotus leaf. The water just doesn't seep in. That makes it easier to stand apart from the body and all the suffering it inflicts on you. You still have that sense of awareness. That's your valuable possession. You hold on to that.

The same with sensual pleasures: You learn to look at them, especially if you've got a state of concentration going in the mind, and you can compare the ease and well-being, the sense of fullness that comes from being concentrated as opposed to the tension, the grasping, the hunger that comes from grasping after any sensual pleasure you can find. You compare them and, after a while, you get a sense of dismay, a sense of detachment.

As this goes deeper, you get thoroughly disenchanted.

It's a good exercise to read all the Buddha similes on sensuality. He says it's like a dog gnawing on some bare bones. In other words, it gnaws on the bones, hoping to get some meat, but the only nourishment it gets is its own saliva. Or he compares it to a drop of honey on a knife. Or a crow that's gotten a piece of meat and other crows come to grab it and tear it away.

As for the things we do in order to hang on to sensual pleasure, they really put us in a lot of danger. And the amount of real gratification we get from them: Where is it? The sensual pleasures you had last week, where are they now? As your powers of concentration get stronger, you get more and more disenchanted with these things when you reflect on them.

But the most important of the causes of fear of death is uncertainty about the Dhamma. If you haven't reached the deathless yet, it's still a question mark. It's just a concept. Did the Buddha really teach it? Was it right? Was it right only for his time? Is it not right for ours? Was the path he taught the right path? Did he leave anything out?

As long as you haven't seen the deathless inside, death is going to hold a lot of fear. But once you've practiced to the point where you've gained insight into the mind's process of fabrication, learning to take it apart to the point where there's no intention in the mind, what's left is the deathless. It's there. When you see it, you realize, one, the Buddha knew what he was talking about. And two, he also taught the right way to get there. You followed his teachings, you look at what you did, and you see that he gave you good guidance.

This is important. Some people talk about awakening experiences, but they don't know what happened. Only *bang!* They were going through all kinds of turmoil inside—this issue was eating them up, that issue was eating them up—then one day everything just fell away, leaving a great sense of relief. But they

don't know how it happened. That's not awakening. Technically that's called a neurotic breakthrough.

That's not what the Buddha was talking about. When you reach awakening, you know how you did it because you had to understand the principles of intention, action in the mind, thoroughly enough so that when there is no intention, you *know* there's no intention, because you're thoroughly familiar with intentions of all kinds through your practice of concentration and discernment.

This is why awakening is not just a spiritual accident, where you simply sit around waiting for the accident to happen. That's not the case at all. It comes from thorough understanding. This is why the Buddha said that discernment is part of the path. You discern how intentions shape your experience, and you also discern how you can refine them to the point where there are no more intentions. That's the point that ends all your doubts about the deathless, all your doubts about the Dhamma.

And that's when your refuge gets really secure. The refuge that's based on concentration is not all that certain. Some people find that they can maintain their powers of concentration through the difficult indignities of aging, illness and death. Other people find that they fall to pieces. But the deathless is not affected by that at all. So that's when your refuge is secure. As we're practicing, we're moving in that general direction, trying to create a refuge that's more and more solid, more and more secure, a place where we can stay when everything else goes crazy.

And if at the moment of death all you've got is concentration, make the most of the concentration. That's your refuge. You can hold on to it. That's a safe place, because the quality of your mind has a large influence on where it's going to when it leaves the body. So you make use of what you've got.

But if you have the time and energy, you keep working to see if you can reach the refuge that's more secure. In other words, you can't be complacent.

But in either event, it's a lot better than being a person who doesn't have any idea of how to find refuge within at all. So many of us identify with our bodies, and when we die, it's as if we're being pushed out of the only thing we know, something that we've held on to for a long, long time. And it's scary. When the mind is put in a position like that, it'll grab on to anything it can find. And for the most part, if it hasn't been trained, it just grabs on to who knows what.

But if you've been training the mind, at least you've got something to hold on to as a refuge. It's important that you have trust in that, have faith in that. And if you have tasted the deathless, it's no longer a question of faith, it's question of

knowledge. You know you can hang on here and be safe. If you reach full awakening, there's no need to hang on to anything at all.

So do your best to find this refuge inside. Work on the virtue that protects you from having memories of cruel things you've done in the past. Work on the concentration that can help pry you away from your attachment to the body, your attachment to sensual objects. And work on the discernment that ends all your doubts about the Dhamma.

It's this way that refuge in the Dhamma moves from something outside to something right here, right now, something that's with you at all times, so that even when death comes, there's nothing to faze you.