

A Clean Break at Death

April 6, 2009

Yesterday marked the seventh year since Ajaan Suwat's passing away. As the Buddha said, when you think of someone who has passed away, you have to remind yourself that you, too, will pass away. There's a funeral waiting for each of us here—if we're lucky, and are not destroyed in some event that makes it impossible for us to have a funeral. We all are going to go one way or another.

There's that passage where the Buddha says that it's not only when you see someone who's passed away that you think about death. You should remind yourself every morning at sunrise: This could be your last sunrise. Every evening at sunset: This could be your last sunset. Are you ready to go? For most of us, the answer is, "not yet," and we try to put the issue out of our minds, which is the least effective way of dealing with it. After all, death is not going to go away when we don't think about it. We'll simply be less prepared for it when it inevitably comes.

We have to think about it, of course, in the right way. Ways of thinking about death that get you so depressed or discouraged that you don't want to accomplish anything in life at all because it all seems so meaningless and pointless: That's not the right use of contemplation of death. The proper use is to get you to the deathless, to the point where the mind doesn't have to experience death anymore. That next best thing is to be able to approach death in such way that the mind is not affected by the death of the body. If it's going to be reborn, let it be reborn in a good place.

This is something we can work on as we practice, not only as we meditate, but also as we go through life. The way we live will have huge impact on how we die. I've noticed people who've had incidents in their lives that they really regret. As death approaches, those incidents come up and face them. It's hard for them to escape. So they try to forget them. As a result, their mindfulness suffers. When you put a lot of energy into forgetting things, you find it harder and harder to be mindful.

So it's not just how we meditate, it's how we live that determines how we're going to die. There are three big mental qualities you want to learn how to avoid: worry, attachment, and uncertainty.

Worry here comes in many forms. One is that you're worried about the people you're leaving behind. Or you're worried about yourself, thinking about things you've done in the past that could lead to an unfortunate rebirth. If you're worried about other people, you have to realize there are times when you just can't

help people anymore and you have to learn how to put those responsibilities down.

This is one of things we do as we meditate. Each time you sit down and close your eyes, tell yourself that you've died to the world. Whatever thoughts of responsibilities come up during your meditation, put them aside, because your mind needs practice in this way. Otherwise, at that moment, your mind will go fastening on this person or that possession, or on things you've done, things you've done to harm other people.

This is why being really scrupulous with your precepts is important, because you don't want to have any lapses in your precepts to come up and make you worry at the time of death. It's amazing how these things can come to the surface. While you're alive you may be very good at keeping them away from your awareness, putting them off, saying it doesn't really matter, but when the mind is weakened as it approaches death, these things seem to develop a life and strength of their own. So you want to examine all of your activities, make sure that they're scrupulous, that you don't want to cause the least little bit of harm or injustice, the least bit of dishonesty in your dealings, because these things have a way of coming back at you.

So try to live in such a way that at the moment of death you won't be worried about things, either the results of past actions, or worried about unfinished business with other people. If there are people you want to apologize to, apologize to them now. If there are people you want to make amends to for things you've done in the past, make amends now if you can. If you can't reach that person any longer, spread thoughts of goodwill in that person's direction. Do that many, many times, so that it becomes your automatic reaction to thoughts about that person. That way, when the time comes to go, you can make a clean break.

The same principle applies to your attachments. You want to make a clean break here as well. The two main things we're attached to our sensual pleasures and to our bodies. If your mind tends to dwell on the pleasures you've enjoyed as a human being, the things you've seen and heard and smelled and tasted and touched, if you've experienced no pleasure higher than that, it's going to be really scary to contemplate the idea of letting go. As your body gets more and more worn out as it gets closer and closer to death, at the very least you want to find some level of happiness that's higher than that so you can begin to pry loose your attachments to these things.

As the Buddha once said, even though you may realize the drawbacks of sensual attachments, you're not going to really be able to let go of them until

you've had at least an experience of the pleasure that comes with strong concentration, or something higher than that.

So training the mind to let go of that sensual desires and all the other hindrances that go along with them is an important skill to develop as you prepare yourself to the fact of death.

The same with your attachment to your own body: As long as you identify the body as yours or as you, death is going to be really scary, because everybody knows what happens to the body at death. It gets into a state where you can't hang on to it any longer. If you can't let go of it, if you don't realize there's more to you than just the body, you're going to be like the spirit that Ajaan Fuang's student saw one night in Bangkok, perched next to its body in its coffin, not knowing where to go.

This is why the skill of meditation where you can see the body as an object separate from your awareness is so important. There is an awareness that doesn't have to depend on the body. It's fashionable now to interpret the Buddha's teachings in terms of neuroscience. They say that your awareness is totally dependent on your body, totally dependent on your sense organs and your brain. But the Buddha never taught that at all. When you can't hold on to your body, what are you going to hold on to? You're going to hold on to craving. As he said, craving is your sustenance as you go from one life to the next. That's what maintains your sense of you as a being in between one birth and the next. And if there's a strong craving to have a body, that's where it's going to lead you. You may end up finding yourself latching on to just any old body at all.

This is one of the reasons we contemplate the body. Some people complain that it's a contemplation just for men who tend to be fascinated with the physical part of lust, i.e., the object of lust. But the Buddha never said that the contemplation of the body was just to overcome lust. It's to overcome your very strong attachment to the body, to see that there's nothing really worth holding on to there. As you're contemplating, you begin to realize that there's an awareness separate from that.

Ajaan Fuang, if his students got visions of themselves in meditation, would have them think of the body in the vision aging ten years at a time, and then finally dying. Then he would have them think about how it would decompose afterwards. Then he'd have them burn it up, so there would be nothing but ashes. What would be left? Your awareness. That was to drive home the point that your awareness is something separate from the body. That's another way to prepare yourself, to try to pry loose your attachment to body, just as you pry yourself loose from attachment to sensual pleasures.

Finally, there's the issue of uncertainty. What's going to happen to you after death? The only way to really overcome that uncertainty is to gain the Dhamma eye, to practice to the point where you really see there is a deathless, that the Buddha was right. He wasn't just talking about abstract ideas. There is a direct experience of the deathless, and you can experience it, too. Once you've had that experience, you realize that none of the five aggregates is present in that awareness of the deathless. This is why you cut off what they call self-identity views, views that would define your self with reference to those five aggregates in any way, either as identical with the aggregates, or as owning the aggregates, or as being *in* the aggregates, or as having the aggregates in you. All those forms of self-identity just get cast aside. You see for sure that what the Buddha taught was true, that the path to the deathless is something you develop through your actions, but that it transcends those actions. That's the point where you can overcome uncertainty.

So those are the three big hindrances you've got to work with: your attachment to sensual pleasures and to your body, your worries, and your uncertainty. Once you've attacked those three hindrances and practiced to the point where you get yourself beyond them, that's when, if the Buddha asks if you're ready to go, you can say Yes. And you're not just putting up a good front. You're genuinely ready to make a clean break.

So keep these issues in mind every day as you see the sunrise, as you see the sunset. These are your primary tasks for the day.