In Your Right Mind at Death

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There’s a fire not too far away, which reminds you that it could come in our direction someday. And the question is, are you ready? We have this tendency to block out the fact that bad things can happen in the world to other people. Which means that bad things can happen to us. We block that out. That’s complacency. Heedlessness. Which the Buddha said is the basis for all unskillful qualities. So we have to cultivate heedlessness instead. Remind ourselves that there are dangers. The big danger in life, of course, is that we’re going to die. And that’s unavoidable. It’s going to happen someday. You can avoid it in specific instances. But it’s going to get you someday. And the question is, are you ready to go? I was reading a series of biographies one time, in French, to get the language back. And I noticed that, especially people in power, people in politics, as they got older, the challenges against them got stronger and stronger. People would let up, seeing that they were old and weak. But that’s when the challenges got really great. The same thing happens at death. You’re weak. The body is malfunctioning. And then on top of that, you’re going to die. Then there’s a challenge. You don’t just give up and go. You’re going to be making choices. Those choices will be determined by your state of mind. Make sure that your state of mind is as good as possible. This is why we meditate. So that no matter how bad things get in the body, no matter how bad things get in the world, we can still maintain our mindfulness. We can still maintain our wits about us. Because a lot of people, when they die, end up choosing places to go that no one in their right mind would want to go. But then again, when you die, you’re very rarely in your right mind. So to put yourself in your right mind, you have to prepare. The Buddha says there are four reasons that fear comes up at death. Fear of losing your body. Fear of losing human sensual pleasures. Fear that the bad things you’ve done in life will lead to punishment in the next life. And the fear that comes from not knowing the true Dharma. The people who have this fear wouldn’t necessarily experience it. They wouldn’t express it in those terms. What it means is they have no idea for sure what’s going to happen at death. They have no proof that there is such a thing as the deathless. So there’s a big gaping hole in their awareness. A big blank. And it’s scary. So we try to prepare for these kinds of fear through our meditation. Like fear of losing the body. It’s one of the reasons why we do body contemplation and go through the body, part by part by part. And you ask yourself, which one is really worth holding on to? Which one is really worth coming back to? So we’re not attracted to the idea of coming back to just any body. So what happens is you realize you can’t stay in this body at that point. And the opportunity comes to go to another one. And many people just jump. So in some cases, it’s simply the opportunity to have any body at all. You go for that. In other cases, you might have a vision of a very attractive body. Either one that you would be able to take on yourself. One that you might get in that particular world. But just because your body looks good by whatever standards you measure good-looking bodies, doesn’t mean that it’s going to be healthy. Doesn’t mean that that life is going to be a good life. There are a lot of really beautiful people who live miserable lives. Their beauty becomes a curse. So you have to think about that. Again, this is why we contemplate the body. Get used to taking off the skin in your mind and taking the different organs out and placing them on the ground. So that when the time comes when you die, that will be a very quick reaction to any beautiful body that comes up. If a heavenly body comes, you can ask yourself what? You may not have the parts of a human body, but devas tend to get complacent. You can imagine what life would be like in one of the heavens, where as soon as you think of wanting something, it appears. You can imagine how you become a spoiled character. And then when you fall from there, you fall hard. And if in your meditation you can develop any of the formless states, stay with this sense of infinite space, stay with this sense of infinite consciousness, nothingness. You don’t feel so threatened when you’re being pushed out of this body. You know that the mind has good places to go. It can be okay about the fact that the body is deteriorating. Ajaan Fu had a student, who one night as she was meditating, had a voice appear in her meditation saying, “You’re going to die tonight.” So she told herself, “Well, if you’re going to die, you might as well die meditating.” So she continued to meditate. And she said it was like the body turned into a house on fire. No matter which room you went into, you couldn’t stay because it was all on fire. And then she remembered space. So she focused on the space element. And then she didn’t feel threatened by the fire in the house at all. The body, everything had settled back down to normal. And she learned an important lesson. If you can access space in your meditation, you don’t feel so threatened when the body pushes you out. And you’re less likely to make quick and unwise judgments. You’re more willing to take a little bit of time and be a little bit more picky about where you go. That can help overcome at least some of your fear of losing the body. As for the fear of losing sensual pleasures, the Buddha has you contemplate there are better sensual pleasures than just the human. Because it is possible to meditate as a deva. There’s a great story in the canon that a person who dies gets reborn as a deva. He meets up with some other devas. It turns out that they were friends and they’re human beings. They’re human lives. And they used to chant together. So he says, “Let’s chant some more.” And so they do. That leads to more dharma practice. Because that’s, again, the problem in the heavenly realms. You get complacent. But we have this problem in the human realm. You get comfortable. You have a nice hut. You have a nice house. You feel secure. You tend to get lazy. And so when you become a deva and you have a deva palace, there’s an even greater tendency to get lazy. So you want to be clear on the fact that wherever you go, you want to practice. You want the opportunity to practice. Which is why it’s good to foster that kind of delight we talked about the other day. The delight in the dharma. The delight in abandoning. The delight in developing. That becomes second nature. And if you can develop the pleasure and rapture that come from concentration, that gives you an alternative. You don’t feel so pulled to go for sensual pleasures of any kind. Otherwise, you get easily trapped. And Chan Mun talks about remembering that he’d been reborn as a dog for 500 lifetimes in a row. It’s hard to imagine him as a dog, but he said it happened. But it’s happened to him. It’s probably happened to you. And he said, “Why was that?” Because he got satisfied with the sensual pleasures of dogs. So be careful about sensuality. This fascination we have with thinking about sex and food and all the other pleasures of the senses, that can appear as you die and it can pull you down. So remember there is this alternative. Develop this alternative and develop a taste for it. The alternative of the pleasure and rapture of concentration. The pleasure of form. Or the pleasure of the formless. That way you won’t feel so desperate and threatened when you die. As for fear of being punished, sometimes as you get close to death, you start thinking about the things you did in the Buddha’s sentence. Times when you were cruel. Times when you did not give help to people who were in danger. It may happen that a bad world appears to you. The worst thing that can happen at that time is that you’re saying, “Gee, I did all this good in my life and I’m going down to a bad place. The Buddha must have been wrong. Right view was probably wrong.” That would actually pull you down. But if you remind yourself that you haven’t done any of the things that would automatically require that you go down to a lower realm, you do have some goodness to you. And you maintain right view. That can close off the paths to those lower realms. So remember how important right view is. Even if you’ve done bad things in this life, they don’t necessarily pull you down. It’s the attitude that rejects right view that pulls you down. So have strong conviction that your actions, your good actions, really do have power. And that you can depend on the memory of those actions. Finally, knowing the true Dhamma. That requires that you have at least a glimpse of the deathless. So you know that there is something in the mind that is outside of space and time. Death goes only as far as space and time. But there’s something in the mind that death can’t touch. When you’ve seen that, as the Buddha says, there’s no fear in death. At least not any fear about where you’re going to go after death. There may be fear of the pain that comes. The fact that your life is interrupted. But then that’s the nature of life. It always gets interrupted. Think about people living in a war zone right now. Whatever plans they had just got chopped off. And that’s the nature of life. The nature of life is not sort of a nice closure, where everybody gets together and talks about how much they love you. All the projects you had planned come to completion. The nature of life is that things get chopped off. They get interrupted. So you’ve got to be prepared. Say, “Well, maybe not this time around. Maybe next time I’ll be able to complete what I wanted to do.” But the only completion that comes in this world is when you gain awakening. Everything else is just a world of loose ends and erupted lives. So do your best while you have this opportunity. While things are comfortable, don’t be heedless. You can prepare for death. So you’re not afraid of it. When you’re not afraid of it, then you will be in your right mind as you die. And be in a much better position to make wise choices.

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