

Practicing Meditation to Perform at Death

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There's a passage where the Buddha's giving advice on how to counsel someone who's dying. The advice assumes that the person has some level of attainment in meditation, but still it's good advice for everybody—and good advice to keep in mind for yourself, in case you don't have anybody hovering around, giving you advice when you die.

The first thing the Buddha recommended is to ask the person, "Are you worried about your family?" If the person says, Yes, you have to remind the person: "You're dying. Now there's nothing you can do for them." Otherwise, what happens when you die, as the Buddha said, is that you latch on to a craving, and that takes you on to the next life, to the next body. The craving may not necessarily be for another body, but it may be for a certain situation, or a certain issue you're concerned about. If you're concerned about your family, you get reborn in your family. You can imagine becoming the child of your niece or nephew. Or maybe nobody in the family is going to have any kids, and you become their dog. You're very protective, but still you're a dog.

So you've got to cut off all thoughts of your family. They have their karma, you have your karma, and you don't want to be hovering around them.

I knew a woman in Thailand who had two sons. Her husband had left her after the second son was born and he just disappeared. So she had to raise the two sons herself. The first son was bright, personable, athletic, good looking. The second son was none of those. The mother really showed a lot of favoritism with the first son.

Well, it was the first son who died. He hopped on his motorcycle one day to pick up some stuff at the store, and within a few minutes, word came back that he had been run over. After a week or so, she came to see me, and said she had a sense that he was still around the house, leaving little signs. For instance, if something good was going to happen that day, there'd be a little dollop of clay left in her drawer. If something bad was going to happen, a little rock.

She wanted him to stay there. There's a belief in Thailand that as long as the body is not cremated, the spirit will hang around. Once it's cremated, then the spirit has no locus, and so it moves on. So she wanted to have the body stored away until she died. I had to talk to her and say, "Look, you're keeping him around the house. It's a miserable life being a spirit, hovering around a house, no matter how much you may love your family. Let him go." So she finally had the body cremated and, sure enough, things at the house quieted down.

So you don't want to be hovering around your family. You've got to cut off thoughts of your family. If you're not on good terms with your family, cut off thoughts of revenge around your family, because those, too, will pull you back, thinking about how somebody in your family wronged you. You don't want that to be the craving that determines where you're going to be reborn.

The next step is to ask the person, "Are you afraid of missing human sensual pleasures?"

If the person says Yes, you can remind the person of the drawbacks of human sensual pleasures. One way of doing that is to remind the person that there are better pleasures in higher levels of heaven. But then, of course, as you go up the levels of heaven, the sensual pleasures there have their drawbacks, too. This is something else that pulls us back. There's a certain pleasure you had in this lifetime, you miss it, and you want to have it again. If the prospect suddenly appears to you as you're dying, that you could have that pleasure again, or maybe something better, something nicer, you go for it. You sign the contract without looking at the fine print.

Part of the fine print, of course, is that you're going to get a body—and if it's a human body, it's got all the drawbacks of a human body. This is why we have that chant on the 32 parts of the body. You're going to get a body with these parts. And each of the parts has its diseases. That's one of the contemplations the Buddha has you focus on while you're sick, just in case you happen to die of the illness. Remind yourself: This illness you have is not a chance thing. It's been waiting for you. Every part of the body has a disease waiting for you. Not just one disease, many diseases.

In fact, as Ajaan Funn interprets the passage, the different parts of the body *are* diseases. Think about it: Each little cell is programmed to grow, and it's the other cells around it that get it to stop. Otherwise, if the cell just grew and grew and grew, it would become a cancer and kill you. If each little part had its way, it would take over. It would malfunction. So the parts are just waiting to malfunction. We're lucky that we get the body to function at all.

So if you go for human sensual pleasures, this is what you're going to be stuck with: a body that's ready to ready to grow ill, a body that's going to age. As the passage in the Canon says, aging drops on you, as if out of nowhere. The body you used to know is not there anymore. It's been replaced by something else. And it doesn't ask permission. When you latch on to the body, it's not the case that the body has agreed that it's going to do what you want. It feels no obligation to you, no matter how well you take care of it.

When I first came back to the States, I got a phone call once from a guy who'd been a master of martial arts. He'd been able to control his body, until it was able to do all kinds of things, smash through all kinds of stuff. But now it had turned on him and fallen ill—and he felt betrayed. He'd taken such good care of it, he had trained it so well. But this is what the body does. It feels no sense of obligation at all. Each part is ready to get diseased. And once you have a body, of course, it's going to open you to all kinds of accidents. You can't guarantee that you're going to have a healthy body all the time, or even a sound body. Or a complete one. This is just part of the fine print of signing onto sensual pleasure.

Another, of course, is that the position of being in slavery to sensual pleasures is not a really good place to be. It's one of the reasons why the Buddha has you think about all the drawbacks of sensuality. One of his images that's pretty vivid, in relation to what we see around here at the monastery, is when a raptor gets a piece of meat, it has to fly away to make sure other raptors don't get it. If they attack it, sometimes it has to let go. Otherwise, they'll kill it. That, the Buddha said, is sensuality. Our sensual pleasures are also like a bead

of honey on the blade of a very sharp knife. To enjoy that little bit of honey, you have to be extremely careful. There are a lot of pleasures in the world you can enjoy only in a very dangerous situation. When you get them, other people want them, too.

So the Buddha has you reflect on the drawbacks of the body and the drawbacks of sensuality, so that your mind doesn't go flowing over into human rebirth again. But even deva sensual pleasures have their drawbacks. It is possible on some levels of the deva realms to practice the Dhamma, but it's so easy to get carried away with the bliss. You get these pleasures you never had before, and part of the mind says, "Well, let me enjoy them for a while and then I'll practice." But then you forget.

So, it's good to reflect on these drawbacks, to keep the mind from just grabbing at whatever, and to get it to look for something better. This is why we practice for the dispassion—to keep in mind the fact that there is something better than these things. There are cases where people gain awakening at the moment of death. Reflect on the fact that even devas suffer from self-identity, identifying with the aggregates one way or another, either identifying with the aggregates themselves or feeling that they are someone who possesses these aggregates, wants to use them as tools, or they're *in* the aggregates, or the aggregates are in them. Even a state of infinite consciousness: You can develop a sense of self around that. A sense of infinite space: You can develop a self around that, and a very strong sense of pride.

One of my favorite stories about monks meditating and gaining visions is of one monk who was meditating out in the forest. As he was sitting and meditating, devas would come past and would stop and bow down to him. He thought to himself, "Gee, this is pretty cool, being a meditating monk. Even devas bow down to you." All of the sudden, a foot appeared out of the sky and kicked him in the head, and a voice said, "Space devas can bow down if they want to, and if not if they don't."

So in that case, the monk had a problem with pride, but you can imagine the space devas had a problem with pride, too. So when you reflect on the dangers of pride and the dangers of self-identification, you want to be in a position where you say, "I don't have to go to any of these places. I don't have to latch on to any of these things."

Now, what that means of course, is that you have to have been practicing. It's one of the reasons why we call it *practicing* meditation, because when death comes you're going to have to *perform*. And you don't want to suddenly suffer from performance anxiety. You want to know what you're doing. You have to be mindful, you have to be alert, and you have to be ardent, all the way to the end, even as the body is falling apart.

So, as you're sitting here meditating and finding yourself giving in to a little pain here, a little pain there, or saying, "I'm tired tonight," remind yourself: When the day comes to perform, it's going to be a lot more difficult than this. So learn to practice with pain, learn to practice with the different hindrances—sensual desire, ill will, all the way down the line—so that when the time comes to perform, you'll have mastered the skills.

Now, there are cases, as they say, where people suddenly pull themselves together at the moment of death. But you make it a lot more likely that you'll be able to do that if you keep

practicing. Practice in spite of pain, or you might say, practice *because* of pain. Practice *because* of tiredness. Practice *because* of the heat outside in the summer and the cold in the winter. Because you want to be able to master these things.