

Interdependence & Death

October 22, 2020

When the Buddha taught the principle of the interconnectedness among beings to young novices, he used the image of feeding. All living beings he said, subsist on food.

It's not a pretty image, because there's suffering on both sides. Of course, those who are being fed on are suffering, but those who have to feed suffer as well. When you're in a position where you need to feed, it's very precarious.

The Buddha never celebrated the principle of interconnectedness because it's all tied up in suffering, pain. That reflection is one of the reflections we employ in order to motivate ourselves to practice—to get out of all this.

Just think about how much our lives depend on things that are totally beyond our control. With the pandemic, with all the social unrest that's going on, it really underscores the point that things could change just a little bit—it wouldn't take much—and a lot of things would come crashing down. And we'd find ourselves deprived of many of the things that we take for granted.

Now, you could think about this in a way that gets you depressed, but that's not the point. The point is that even without pandemics and even without social unrest, there's still aging, illness, and death. These things can happen at any time. The question always is, "Are you ready to go?"

When the Buddha talks about being in the present moment, it's not to celebrate the present moment, it's because that's where work has to be done. You know you have this present moment. As for tomorrow, or an hour from now, or two minutes from now, you don't really know—but you do have this breath.

So what can you do with this breath besides just keep yourself alive? It's good to stop and take stock. If you were to die, what would you have to take with you? You can't take the body. You can't take your relationships. You can't take your material possessions. You take the qualities you build into the mind.

So what qualities do you have? Are they the qualities that would try to grasp on to things here before you go? If they are, they're going to weigh you down. So you have to learn to think in ways that can cut all those ties, shave all the hooks off the Velcro, and focus more inwardly at

your awareness. That's what you want to work on.

But it's good to have some values that remind you of why this is important—like those pair of chants we had just now. First: “The world is swept away, it does not endure, we're a slave to craving, there is no shelter,” and then: “May I be happy.” It sounds like a hopeless hope, but it's not hopeless. That's the whole point of this type of contemplation. There is a sense of well-being that can be developed in the mind that's independent of the life of the body. That's the Buddha's message. Have you found that yet? What do you need to do to find it?

As the Buddha said, when you think about death, the purpose is to motivate you to find the deathless. And where is it going to be found? By working *here* in the present moment.

So there are lots of ways you can think to remind yourself that this is an important place to be, because there's work to be done. And the most important work you can do is the work you can do right now, right here.

Years back, a woman came to Wat Dhammasathit. She was going to spend two weeks meditating. And the second day she was there, she came to say goodbye. She was going to go home, and Ajaan Fuang asked her why.

She said, “I keep thinking of the people at home, what they're going to do, who's going to look after them.” He said, “Tell yourself that you've already died. They're going to have to look after themselves.” So she did, and she was able to make it through the two weeks.

I've always found that an effective way of thinking about death: You're already dead. You just happen to be hanging around, seeing what's leftover afterwards. It gives you some distance from a lot of things. You realize once you die, you can't change that, you can't change this, you've just got to leave the world as it is—with all its loose ends.

The world is full of loose ends. It's not the nature of the world that it's ever going to reach closure. There will come a time when no matter how much you want to talk to somebody or say something or get a message to them, you can't. So one thing this contemplation does is to remind you that if there's something really important you want to say to somebody else—especially things that are good, things that are useful—say it now. Don't let it go left unsaid.

Then turn around and look at your mind.

If it starts wondering about next week's work or tomorrow's work, just tell yourself, “Okay, suppose I were already dead. It wouldn't matter. What would matter at that point?” The qualities you build into the mind—or the qualities that strengthen the mind's good side and also allow you to abandon the things that would keep you tied down.

Another way of contemplating death is to remind yourself that this body you've got here: Once you leave it, you're not going to want it. Ajaan Fuang made a comment one time when he was teaching in Wat Makut. It was a funeral monastery, and on Saturday evenings he tended not to have many people come. The people who came on Saturdays tended to come during the day. So in the evenings, he might go walk around the monastery a little bit to stretch his legs. One evening he came back and said, "You know, the number of people who die and hang around their bodies is awfully high."

I could only imagine what he saw as he was walking past what he would call the "body shops." They'd have these pavilions, about twenty pavilions altogether, where they'd have a coffin and a place where people would sit, and a place where monks would sit, for the ceremonies.

He had a student one time who was sitting in meditating and she had a vision. Behind the building where Ajaan Fuang taught—he was up on the second story of the building—there was a little field of what they called envelopes, concrete block structures each just big enough to stick a coffin in.

In Thailand, when somebody dies, they ordinarily don't have the funeral right away, especially not in central Thailand. They wait until the family's ready. In the meantime, they have to keep the body someplace, so they have these envelopes. The ones behind Wat Makut were all lined up, four or five lines.

In the vision, she saw a ceremony where a coffin was being placed in one of the envelopes, and there was a man standing at the entrance to the envelope wearing a gray suit. As the people were leaving after the ceremony, he looked left, right, and went *shwut* into the envelope. It startled her.

She left meditation and looked out the window, and sure enough, this ceremony had just taken place. So she went down and asked the people who were leaving, "The person who died: Did he look like this?" She described the man in the suit, and they said "Oh yeah. That's him."

So she went back up and asked Ajaan Fuang, "What do I do now?" He told her, "See if you can get that vision in your meditation again, and then look inside the envelope." She did, and there in the envelope the man was squatting next to his body, looking lost. Ajaan Fuang told her, "Okay, now dedicate the merit of your meditation to him." And she did. She said it was like a headlight from a car, going out from her chest. The man looked up at her, looked startled, and then there was kind of a light of recognition. Then he disappeared.

So part of preparing yourself to die is to remind yourself: You don't want to hang around here. Think of the good that you've done, and then follow that, because otherwise you end up just wandering around fixated, and not really knowing where to go or what to do.

There is a skill to dying. There's a passage where the Buddha's leaving after having spent the rains retreat, and one of his cousins comes and asks, "When you're gone and somebody's dying, what do I do?" And the Buddha gave recommendations for the advice to give—and it's good advice to give yourself.

First, whatever you're worried about, in terms of the work you've left behind, or the people you're leaving behind, remind yourself: "Okay, I can't think about those people at all right now." If you've had practice in meditating, that's one of the things you've been learning how to do—not think about the people around you, not think about the people in your life, think only about your breath.

There are some people who say, "Well, you wouldn't have any breath at that point." But when you're working with the breath, it's not just the breath you're working with. When the Buddha talks about working with the sixteen steps of breath meditation, he's also talking about mental fabrication, and the instructions themselves are in the form of verbal fabrication. The purpose of this focus on fabrications is to get you sensitive to the way you shape your mind through your perceptions and feelings—that's what's going to hold you in good stead when there's no more breath to watch. If you can perceive that the affairs of the world are behind you now, that'll be a good perception to hold in mind.

Then the next is: Are you concerned about leaving the pleasures of the human world? Well, there are better pleasures in the deva worlds. And the Buddha recommends describing one level and then the next higher level, and then the next, and the pleasures get better and better. So you can remind yourself: There's a lot better than the human realm. Don't hang around here.

But then you remind yourself further that even in the highest levels of the heaven, people are still stuck on self-identity: identifying themselves around the aggregates. So see if you can let go of that. At the same time, there's another perception that goes along with this: seeing the undesirability of any world.

So if you catch yourself identifying with your thoughts or your perceptions, try to be very careful about which perceptions you hold on to, like the perceptions that tell you that you don't want to create a sense of identity, and you don't want to inhabit any of the worlds that can

appear to you. In other words, you don't want to get involved in becoming, because that's what becoming is: an identity in a particular world.

You've seen them all in principle. They all start and they end, and no matter how wonderful they may be, there's nothing left when they're gone. We like to think that we have good memories of the good things that we've done or experienced, but memories begin to fade and they get confused. Then you have nothing left.

Ajaan Suwat would ask, "Those sensual pleasures you had last week, where are they now?" Well, the same principle holds for no matter how good the sensual pleasures are in the heavenly realms. There's nothing left, except for the karma that got you there, and when that runs out, what do you have left then?

We tend to think that we *gain* something by creating new states of becoming, but each one crumbles like dust. You're better off if you can find something that doesn't require a state of becoming, doesn't require an identity, and is not a world: something that's not fabricated. So you try to incline your mind in that direction. If you're going to hold on to a perception, that's a good one to hold on to.

As you can see, dying well is something you have to practice. And this is what the meditation's for. Even if you're not consciously thinking about contemplation of death, the fact that you're trying to get the mind settled with the breath, using the proper perceptions, the proper ways of talking to yourself, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world, putting aside any reference to who you think you are, and just looking at the problem of suffering and what's causing it: All of this is preparing you to die well.

When you learn how to think in impersonal terms like this, it's really going to be helpful at the time of death—because we take death so personally: "All the things that I've done in my life, they're all going to go away, and where am I going to go now?" It's just *I, I, I, I...*

But if you learn to relate to your own mind, relate to what's going on here in the meditation in impersonal terms, then you can bring the same perspective to the process of dying. It goes a lot more smoothly, a lot more skillfully.

As the Buddha said, if you really do it right, it's possible to gain release as you use that perception of not wanting to identify with any of the aggregates that come up, along with the perception of the undesirability of any world.

The question is what will you have left?

Ajaan Lee's answer is, "You won't need to have anything left. That's where you're going to

find nibbana.” So it’s in this way that contemplation of death leads to the deathless. It’s just a question of doing it right.