

## *Skills Needed at Death*

*January 27, 2021*

Ajaan Fuang would often say that when you're meditating, you're practicing how to die. The issues that come up in the mind as you meditate are very similar to the issues that will come up then: distraction, pain, sleepiness. So it's good to learn how to deal with these things right now, because otherwise they'll get in the way.

That's the other part of preparing for how to die: understanding the Buddha's analysis of what happens. When we talk about mindfulness of death, we usually focus on the fact that it could come at any time. But you could take that fact and do a lot of different things with it. One common attitude, of course, is, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die." In other words, try to stuff your time up with as many pleasures you can. If you had no control over the mind at all, and if the thoughts in the mind didn't make any difference at death, then that would make sense. But in the Buddha's analysis, the mind is making choices at that point. The problem is, it's often making them under the power of aversion. It doesn't want to die, but it can't stay in the body anymore. There's a lot of ignorance, and on top of that there's desperation.

That's the main difference between meditating and dying in meditation. You can choose whether you're going to meditate right now. When the time for death comes, though, you can't choose whether you're going to die. You have to drop everything and be ready to go.

So what skills will you need then? One is dealing with the distraction. You've got to keep your mind focused, because as the Buddha said, we're going to be reborn: For most of us, that's what's going to happen. Only a very few of us don't have to be reborn. But if we're going to be reborn, it'll happen in line with our clinging and craving. The image he gives is a fire going from one house to the next. It's blown from the first house to the second house by the wind. In the Buddha's time, they believed that fire actually clung to the wind as it was sustained by the wind. In the same way, at death we cling to craving. What you crave will determine where you're going to go—and that's a scary thought because our cravings are often out of control.

As the Buddha said, the mind is the quickest thing to change direction. There's nothing else that he could think of as an analogy for how quick it is to change. So to keep it from changing direction in the wrong way, you've got to have very firm control over getting it pointed in the right direction: what the Buddha calls

having your self rightly directed, and then being mindful enough to keep it in that direction.

So right now as you find yourself sitting with the breath and then suddenly someplace else, ask yourself, “Here I am sitting perfectly fine. The body’s relatively healthy. Yet look what the mind does.” What are the warning signals? How do you know when it’s about to head off to someplace else, and how do you talk it out of doing that?

Often there will be a little signal inside. “As soon as the boss isn’t looking,” it says, “let’s go.” And then it falls silent. Then it comes back again, “When the boss isn’t looking, let’s go.” It gets more frequent, and then finally when you do have a momentary lapse of mindfulness, there it goes. So watch out for those little voices. They’re there. To hear them, you have to learn to keep yourself as quiet and as alert as possible, looking for those little signals that get sent to the mind.

As you’re dealing with the breath, one way of obliterating those signals is to try to make the breath as comfortable as possible, as gratifying a sensation of the body as you can imagine. Which means you have to ask yourself: “Which parts of the body are not particularly enjoying the breath right now? In what ways is the breath getting mechanical?” Give it a sense of real pleasure right here. In other words, feed the mind so that it doesn’t go looking other places for its nourishment.

With pain, you have to be able to separate your awareness of the pain from the pain itself. A lot of this has to do with how you talk to yourself about the pain. First, of course there’s the conversation that says, “This shouldn’t be here. I don’t want this.” To that you can say, “Well, there it is. What are you going to do?” You can take medicine sometimes and it will go away, but other times it just doesn’t go away. And it’s not the case that it doesn’t have the right to be there. It’s the nature of the body to experience pain.

This is why we have that chant again and again: Aging, illness, and death are normal. We’re subject to these things—and the Thai translation is that they’re normal. Pain is normal. So what are you going to do about it? With something that’s normal like that, you have to learn to live with it but not suffer from it.

This is why I make that distinction between the suffering of the three characteristics and the suffering of the four noble truths. The fact that things are fabricated means they’re going to be stressful. That’s the nature of fabrications. The stress of inconstancy is something that’s not going to change.

What you *can* change is the stress that comes from craving, the stress that comes from ignorance. That doesn’t have to be there. That’s the optional part. So you have to ask yourself, “Where are you going to find the ignorance?” And the

Buddha says, look at the fabrications in the mind: the way you fabricate the in-and-out breath, the way you fabricate your thoughts, the way you fabricate your perceptions and feelings. Try to be as really clear as possible around these things.

In particular, the perceptions: One of the points that the forest ajaans make again and again is that if you want to understand all five aggregates, get so that you know one really well. The one they all seem to focus on is perception. Seeing how arbitrary your perceptions are can help loosen up a lot of the firm assumptions you have about things that are making you suffer: “This has got to be that way; that has got to be this way.” But if thinking that things have to be that particular way is making you suffer, why hold on in that way? There must be another way to approach things so that you don’t have to suffer.

Remember right view. Arahants have right view and they don’t suffer. They’re with pain but they’re not suffering from it. They’re with difficult situations in life and they don’t suffer from them. So the fact that you’re suffering means that you have wrong view in there someplace. When you can identify the different perceptions and stories that go around pain, ask yourself: Can you change the perceptions? Can you change the stories so that they’re still true but they don’t stab you? When death comes, there’s going to be a lot of pain. For many people, this is why they can’t stay in the body: It just gets too painful. They’re being pushed out. And because there’s a sense of desperation that goes along with that, they’ll jump at anything.

That’s not a position you want to be in. The more you can be with pain and not suffer from the pain, then the more choices you’ll see and you won’t jump at the first option. Often the first option comes immediately after the thought, “I don’t want to die.” Then you can come up with all the different reasons why you don’t want to die and you’re going to latch on to those. Instead, tell yourself, “It doesn’t matter whether you want to or not, it’s happening. You’ve been practicing all this time. Bring out your skills.”

Then, of course, there’s the problem of sleepiness. As the body wears down, you get more and more groggy. There’s less and less energy. You have to learn how to maintain alertness even in the midst of that. One of the better techniques I’ve found is to take an interest in identifying the signs of the body that say, “Hey, I’m getting sleepy.” What are the sensations around the eyes, what are the sensations around parts of the body that you take as signs you’ve got to sleep? Question them. The fact that you’re taking an active interest in them can help to keep a lot of the sleepiness at bay.

Now, if you die in your sleep, what apparently happens is that you wake up enough to know that you’re dying—which is why you want to keep the Buddha’s

teachings in mind about what actually happens then. You do have a choice. If you're going to go with craving, choose your best craving. Crave to come to a place where you can practice.

This is one of the reasons why the ajans like to recommend a meditation word to hold in mind. Because at that point you can't hold a lot in mind, but a simple word like that you can. And with practice, that word will have been invested with a lot of meaning. Buddhho, "awake," is their favorite one, but you can use any that has some meaning for you. That acts as a signal to remind you of what needs to be done. That will wake you up, so that the mind is in a position where it can make a good choice at that point.

The skills you develop as you meditate are precisely the skills you're going to need at the moment of death, so take them seriously. Give your full attention to mastering them. This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration, to give the mind direction. That's the most important thing you're going to need at that point: a direction. And you'll need to be able to stay in that direction. So learn how to fight the mind's tendency to be switching direction so quickly, so easily. That's probably the most important skill you can muster. It requires a lot of mindfulness, a lot of discernment, but these are precisely the things we develop as we point the mind at the breath and keep it there.

At the moment of death, you will have to leave the breath, but you will have learned a lot about the mind in the meantime. That should be enough to keep you headed in the right direction.