

Mindfulness of Death

October 1, 2017

When I was a young monk, there was one time when Ajaan Fuang was invited to give some Dhamma talks in Wat Asokaram during the rains retreat. It turned out he was able to give only one talk. After that, he got sick. At the end of the rains retreat, I went to Wat Asokaram for the Dhamma exams. It turned out that a monk had recorded the talk. Usually, Ajaan Fuang wouldn't let anyone record his Dhamma talks, his idea being that the talk was specifically for the people who were there. But this monk had snuck his tape recorder into the room. He showed me the tape and let me listen to it. Now, tapes of Ajaan Fuang's Dhamma talks were really rare. So that day, I sat down and transcribed the tape before I gave it back to him. It was lucky that I did, because a few days later, he was testing a new tape recorder and, by mistake, he happened to put that cassette tape into the recorder to record somebody else. And so Ajaan Fuang's voice was erased. And that was that. Fortunately, though, we had the transcript. And if I hadn't done it right away, it would have been lost.

I mention this today because today is a beautiful day to meditate. The weather's cooled down. It's not too cold; not too hot. There's a nice breeze. We're out in the middle of nature. It's a comfortable day to meditate. And the problem is that on the comfortable days to meditate, we tend to just fall for the comfort and get lazy. We need to remind ourselves that good days like this don't often come. We don't know when the next one's going to be, or how much longer we'll have. We don't know when the opportunity will be lost.

So now that we have the opportunity, now that we have the time, make the most of it. This is called recollection of death, or mindfulness of death. It's the fourth of the guardian meditations. And it's here to guard you against your laziness, to guard you against your heedlessness, to remind you there's work to be done. And you have the opportunity now. You don't know how much longer it's going to be, because death can come at any time. It doesn't come with any warning. It's not written on the sun the morning that you're going to die that today is your last day.

So you don't want to die with the memory that you had all kinds of opportunities and you didn't make the most of them. That's a very depressing way to die. You have to remind yourself, each time your heart beats, that you have an opportunity to practice. You don't want all those heartbeats to go to waste, because there will come a time when the heart just stops. At that point, if you think back, "Oh, I wish I had a few more heartbeats to get my mind together." Well, you did have heartbeats in the past. Why didn't you use them then? It's a sad thought. You don't want to die with sadness. You want to die with a sense that you got the most out of this body. Thinking of it as being like a fruit, you squeeze the juice out of the fruit before you throw away the rind. You don't want to throw it away with still a lot of juice in there.

The Buddha teaches you to reflect on death in two ways. One, he says, every evening when the sun sets, remind yourself that this could be your last night. Death can come very easily. Are you ready to go? If not, what in your mind would be the obstacle? Well, work on that obstacle right now. The same thing in the morning when the sun rises: This could be your last day. Are you ready to go? If not, what's the obstacle in your mind? Work on that obstacle right now. That's one kind of reflection.

The other reflection is simply each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, just tell yourself, "May I live to complete this breath. There's a lot of good I can do with this breath." It brings you right in the present moment.

But you notice, the thoughts on death don't stop with death. Then turn around and focus on your mind: the work that needs to be done with the mind and the work that can be done. It is work you can do. If it weren't something you could do, the Buddha wouldn't recommend thinking about it. He'd just say, "Well, accept death when it comes and that's it." But that's not the kind of Buddha he was, and that's not the kind of mindfulness of death he taught.

Before death comes, try to get the most you can out of what needs to be done. Your suffering needs to be comprehended. Its cause needs to be abandoned. The cessation of suffering should be realized. And the path should be developed. There you are: four duties, work to be done. The Buddha never said to be in the present moment simply because it's a pleasant place to be or a wonderful place to be. He didn't say that your present moment awareness is unconditioned. He simply said, "Focus on the present moment because there's work to be done here."

And you don't know how much longer you've got in this lifetime, but you do know that you have now. So recollection of death doesn't stop with death. It focuses on the fact that the mind goes beyond death and you're going to need good qualities not to suffer from the death and to be able to establish yourself well in the next life. Or, if you can go beyond having to be reborn, so much the better. So these reflections don't focus on death. They focus on the importance of the mind and your ability to make something good out of the mind. This is why recollection of death is not depressing. It's encouraging. There's work to be done with each breath; work to be done with each heartbeat.

So if you find yourself thinking thoughts you shouldn't be thinking while you're meditating or as you go through the day, just tell yourself, "You just wasted that breath. You just wasted that heartbeat. Don't waste the next one." When you can think of it that way, then your recollection of death will get the results at which it's aimed.

As the Buddha said, recollection of death leads ultimately to the deathless. As he says in the Dhammapada, "Heedful people don't die. The heedless are as if already dead." And there is a deathless element in the mind that can be found if you work on your meditation. If you develop good thoughts in the mind, good qualities in the mind, they can lead you to something that's beyond death. So make the most of them.