

## *Taking the Opportunity*

*November 18, 2011*

There's a passage where the Buddha tells his monk disciples to be heedful. And the different monks talk about how they try to practice heedfulness.

One says, "I tell myself every day, 'May I live for one more day and I'll have a great opportunity to practice.'"

Another one says, "I say, 'May I live for at least half a day more and I'll have a great opportunity to practice.'"

And it works on down until finally you get one monk who says, "Each time I breathe in and breathe out I say, 'May I live for one more breath so I can practice.'"

And the Buddha said that only the last one counted as really heedful.

That's because death can come at any time without any warning. It doesn't send any invitations or notices out beforehand.

Although it may seem depressing to think about death, that's not the purpose of this kind of contemplation. After all, death isn't the end. It's just the next step to a new life. You want to be prepared to make that next step well.

This is where it's important to realize there are skillful and unskillful ways of dying, just as there are skillful and unskillful ways of living—and it turns out the skillful ways of living and the skillful ways of dying are pretty much the same thing. They come down to learning to have some control over your mind so that it doesn't go out and create all kinds of thought worlds that come back and attack you.

You've got this opportunity right now to be with the breath, to practice mindfulness, develop your mindfulness, develop your alertness.

You don't know when the time's going to come when: Whoops! That's it. Something gets stuck in your heart or stuck in your throat or that earthquake they keep warning about that can happen. It doesn't come with any warning: What are you going to do then?

The mind that hasn't learned how to put aside its thoughts is going to have a lot of trouble at that point because the thoughts are going to go reaching out in all kinds of directions all at once. But if you develop the skill that whatever thought comes up you can say No, No, No, you have some protection. This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration: to get practice in just saying No, regardless of what the thought may be.

That way when you're in a much weaker or more threatened position, you've got some skills you can fall back on, starting with the skill to say No to your

unskillful thoughts.

So it's not the case that the oldest person in the room is going to be the first one to go. Who knows, sometimes the younger people go first. Babies die.

It's important that each of us has a strong sense that we've got some time right now, so let's make the best use of the time right now. If it turns out you live another long time, you can look back when you finally do die—and it always comes too soon—you look back and you say “At least I did the best I could with the time I had.” That gives you a lot of energy right there.

So you want to be mindful, be alert, look at what your mind is telling you, what you can believe, what you can't believe. Learn how to sort things out inside. That's the most important work you can do.

When you do that, that's when you count as being heedful. And that, as the Buddha said, is the basis for all skillfulness, for living a life that's skillful, for having actions, words, thoughts that are skillful.

Realize that you've got the time right now, you've got the opportunity right now. You don't know how much longer you're going to have it. But as long as you've got it right now, make the best use of it while you've got it.

That's the skill of living.