

## *Death is the Context*

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When the Buddha talks about staying in the present moment, it's never just because it's a good place to stay or the only place to stay. The mind can stay in all kinds of places, and the present moment is not always good. The reason he has you focus on the present is because there's work that needs to be done here.

And when he talks about staying in the present moment, it's always in the context of thinking that death could happen at any time. It could happen tomorrow; it could happen today. There was one time when he was asking the monks if they thought about death often. One of them said, "I think about it once a day." Another said, "I think about it twice a day." It got down to one monk saying that "I think about it while I'm chewing my food, 'May I live to the point where I can swallow this food and in that amount of time, I'll practice.'" Another one was saying, "When I breathe in, I tell myself, 'May I live throughout this breath so I can practice for the extent of this breath.'"

The Buddha said the last two were the only ones who really counted as heedful. You realize, okay, you don't know how much time you have, but you do have this little span of time right here. So make the most of it while you can, because it's not going to be here all the time. Death could come at any moment and you don't want to be caught unprepared—and you don't want to be caught thinking about all the time you wasted in the past.

So death lies behind all the teachings, particularly the teachings of why you want to stay here in the present moment, because there's work that needs to be done. The mind has these potentials of greed, aversion, and delusion, all kinds of unskillful ways of feeding on this and feeding on that. If we don't take care of that *now* while we have the opportunity to practice, *when* will we take care of it? And if we die with those habits still ingrained in the mind, we're just going to go feeding wherever we can.

Which is why the Buddha's image of death and rebirth is throwing a stick up in the air. Sometimes it lands on this end, sometimes it lands on that end, sometimes it lands splat in the middle. It's all pretty random. In other words, even though you may have some good karma, you've also got some bad karma somewhere in the past, so you never know what's going to come up and be really strong right there at the moment of trying to find a new place to take birth. The only security is if you've found something deathless inside. That gives you something to hold on to even as the body's wasting away, as your mind is beginning to get less and less clear.

So try to practice for the sake of that. Birth is all around us, which means death is all around us, and then rebirth is all around us again. So you want to make sure that you do it well, so that if you still have to take rebirth, take rebirth in a good place so that you can continue practicing.

It all starts right here.