

## *How to Think about Death*

*November 27, 2014*

When Ajaan Fuang was teaching meditation, occasionally one of his students would have a vision of him or herself appearing in the meditation. So Ajaan Fuang would have the student imagine the body decaying. What would it look like in five years' time? Ten years' time? Twenty? Thirty? Forty? Dead? After it had died? First day, second day, third day. Then he'd have the student cremate it until there was nothing but ashes, and then bring it back, step by step, to the present moment.

It's a good exercise in thinking about what's going to happen—when the mind is calm and when it's collected, so as to avoid the usual fear and dismay that comes with thinking about these things. After all, these things will happen and they don't go away when you don't think about them. In fact, if you don't let yourself think about them, then it's a huge shock when aging, illness, and death actually come. So even if this sort of vision doesn't appear spontaneously in your meditation, it's a good exercise: Can you visualize these things without feeling any remorse, any sadness? What kind of perceptions can you use to protect yourself from feeling remorse, sadness, and dismay? So that you realize, "Oh, this is just the normal way things are," and you're not knocked off your balance by thinking about the normal way things are.

This morning someone was telling me about an experiment they'd done at an old folks' home, where they played music from the time when the old people were still young. They had everybody wear clothes from that time and they decorated the place from that time. They were saying that the old people seemed to age more slowly, their mood was better, everything was a lot more upbeat.

So the question was, when you help people perceive themselves as younger and they get younger, then what happens if you start perceiving yourself as old: Is it going to make you age more quickly? And I said No. We're not trying to let ourselves be under the power of perceptions. We're trying to liberate ourselves from our perceptions, especially the perceptions that create suffering. So instead of being in denial and allowing your perceptions to manipulate you, you want to be able to stand apart from them.

After all, I've noticed that monks tend to age more slowly than laypeople. I think a lot of it has to do with this ability to think about things that people ordinarily shy away from. They know they're going to happen. We know we're all going to die at some point; you know it's something that's going to happen. But if

you don't allow yourself to think about it, there's a huge disconnect in there, a lot of tension. Whereas if you can train the mind to contemplate these things and find ways of perceiving your own aging, illness, and death in a way that doesn't disturb the mind at all, that lifts a huge burden off the mind.

This comes under the principle of respect for heedfulness—in other words, realizing that we have to take time to think about things we don't ordinarily like to think about, so that we'll all be prepared when the things we don't like to have happen will happen. You can't avoid it.

Ajaan Fuang once said that as soon as you're born, you enter the queue to die, and you don't know where you are in line. You may think that you're newborn, so you're way at the end, and it's going to be a long time. But sometimes people die in the womb or they die soon after they're born. It can happen anytime, at any age.

So it's coming, and we've got to prepare. The best way to prepare, of course, in addition to allowing yourself to think about it, is to look at the perceptions that come up and to figure out, "How can I change those perceptions?" What's the perception that gives that little catch in the heart when you think about your own death? Or when you visualize yourself at eighty and all the problems that you're going to have just getting around walking and whatever: What is it that causes that catch in the heart? Can you perceive things in a different way?

In addition to that questioning of your perceptions, you have to work on your concentration, so that you have some stability. The mind needs its foundation inside: first with the concentration and then with the discernment as you learn how to notice which motions of the mind go toward suffering and which other motions go away. This becomes your foundation, your safe place.

So we think about death, we think about the unattractiveness of the body, not to get discouraged, not to be depressed. In fact, for the opposite reason: We think about these things as an encouragement to practice, to realize: What in life really is worthwhile? The body is useful, but we can depend on it only up to a point. If we get attached to it, it becomes one reason to fear death.

Altogether, the Buddha said, there are four reasons for fearing death. One is attachment to sensual pleasures—or sensuality, your ability to think about sensual pleasures. The second is attachment to the body. The third is realization that you've done something really unskillful and might have to pay for it. And the fourth is the realization you haven't really seen the true Dhamma. Because when you see that there really is something deathless that can be found through the path, that lifts the fear of death immeasurably, because you realize that death is not the end.

So wherever you can chip away at your fear of death, you make the fact of

aging, illness, and death a lot easier to take. And it's one of *the* essential projects of being a human being. Animals are born, they have fear, but they can't really prepare for their own deaths. Human beings can prepare for their own deaths. We know it's going to happen, we see it all around us, we understand what's happening, so we should take advantage of the warnings that are all around us.

In the Canon, they call these the divine messengers. In some cases, it's a baby newly born: crying, suffering. An old person, a sick person, a dead person. Sometimes they add to the list someone who's in prison and in chains. These are the warnings all around us, and as human beings we can see them and can think about them. We can learn how to take advantage of them so that we don't have to suffer when unfortunate things happen.

That's the whole purpose, say, of body contemplation: How can you contemplate your body and think about all the parts in there in such a way that the mind doesn't get disturbed? How can you think about your own death in such a way that the mind doesn't get disturbed? Root out the perceptions that cause disturbance and suffering, and you've done a lot of the work that needs to be done in the mind.