

Practice in Dying Skillfully

October 15, 2015

Ajaan Fuang used to say that when we meditate, we're gaining practice in the skills we're going to need when we die. It's true of the big problems that'll happen as death approaches. There'll be distraction and pain—the same problems we deal with as we're meditating, sitting here trying to get the mind with the breath. First you find yourself fighting off distractions and if you don't get the distractions out of the way in time, then the pain comes, especially if you sit for long periods of time or if you're not used to sitting in the meditation posture. How you learn how to deal with these problems is what will give you the skills you'll need when death approaches, whether it comes very quickly and unexpectedly, or at the end of a long illness. Two members of our extended community died yesterday. One after a long illness, and the other very unexpectedly, struck down while crossing a street.

When death happens suddenly, time slows down so that a lot of decisions are being made at that split second. A lot of things will be coming up in the mind, and you have to decide what to focus on and what not to focus on, just as you're trying to decide right now. Now we're telling you to stay with the breath. But at that point, of course, the breath will be leaving.

One of skills that's really useful to have as you meditate is learning how to gain a sense of awareness on its own. You're aware of the breath—in the beginning stages of the concentration, trying to become one with the breath. But then after you become one with the breath, there's a natural separation. It's like two different kinds of liquid, such as oil and vinegar, in the same bottle. As the bottle sits still for a while, they begin to separate out naturally. You don't have to divide the vinegar from the oil, molecule by molecule. Instead, the molecules separate out on their own. And it's the same with the mind. When you're still with the breath long enough, with a sense of being one with the breath, after a while there comes a sense of separating out. It's a good skill to have.

As the Buddha said, consciousness doesn't need a body in order to continue being conscious. It's an activity that can feed off of other things as well. It can feed off of your craving. It can feed off of your clinging. In fact, that's what you have to watch out for when death comes. Where are your cravings and clingings going to take you?

The Buddha once said there are two things you have to watch out for. One is being worried at death. In other words, there are things that you're leaving

behind, either issues in your family or issues at work—unresolved things. At that point, he says, you've got to let go. There's nothing more you can do for them. The time for doing things about them has passed. If you can remember that, it'll help untangle a lot of entanglements that otherwise would keep you tied down.

Years back, I was invited to chant at a house where the grandmother died. It turned out that she had buried a sum of money under one of the trees behind the house. The people meditating in the house picked up the fact that she was still hanging around that tree. What was peculiar about it was that they were able to get in touch with her through the meditation and ask her, "What would help you give up your attachment?" First she told them about the fortune. But then, after they dug down and found it, she was still hanging around the tree. She couldn't let go of the tree. She told them, "Well, there's a Western monk who knows how to chant the Mahasamaya. Have him come and chant it at the house." So they tracked me down.

That's an illustration of what happens when you hang on to something. You get reborn in a tree. There are worse things to get reborn into, depending on what you get worried about, but it's unnecessary, unfinished business.

So the Buddha says that if you're giving counsel to anybody who's dying or you're giving counsel to yourself when you suddenly find yourself faced with death, the first thing is: Don't worry about anything. Leave it behind. The time has come to let it go, because the mind is going to move on now, and you've got to be very careful about what it's moving on to.

The other thing you have to watch out for at the moment of death is fear—fear of the unknown, of course.

Fear of death, as the Buddha analyzed it, basically comes down to four things. One is fear of leaving the body. This is one of the reasons why we do that contemplation of the body parts, to realize that there's not that much worth hanging on to here. You go through the different parts: Do you want to hang on to your liver? Do you want to hang on to your intestines? When you take the body apart in that way, you begin to see that there's nothing here worth hanging on to; nothing worth being worried about. Of course, for a lot of us, we can't think of any way we would be aware or conscious without being with the body. So one of the things we have to realize is it's not necessary for awareness to continue there.

Awareness will continue without the body. If you can get into meditation to the point where you hit any of the formless attainments, you find it's true that consciousness as you experience it from within doesn't have to have any relationship to a body at all. This is an important realization. Looking from the

outside, people say, “Oh, the fact that you’re conscious means that even though you’re not aware of the body, your consciousness depends on the body.” But when you die, you’re not worried about what people looking at you from the outside would see or say. You’re worried about your consciousness as you’re experiencing it from within. And if you can get used to the idea of being conscious without a sense of the body, then it helps give you some confidence that maybe it’s true what the Buddha said, that you don’t have to worry about hanging on to the body.

Ajaan Fuang used would sometimes walk around Wat Makut, which is the major cremation monastery in Bangkok where he taught. On a Saturday evening, not many people came to meditate with him—they’d come during the day—so he’d take some time to go out and stretch his legs. The monastery had a number of pavilions where the funerals were being held—he called them “body shops.” He came back one evening after one of his walks and said, “You know the number of people who die and still hang around the body is awfully large.”

He didn’t say anything more than that. But this is something you’ve got to watch out for. You don’t want to be stuck on your body, because it’s a miserable place to be, hanging around a dead body. You have to realize: This is not yours anymore. This is no place for you. Nothing here is going to help you. It’s time to move on.

So it’s good to learn how to contemplate the body, whether through contemplation of the body parts, contemplation of the body into elements, or gaining a sense of formless concentration where you don’t have to depend on the body. The body is not impinging on your awareness. This gives you some confidence that you don’t want to hang around here—and you don’t *have* to hang around here.

The second reason we fear death is that we fear losing our human sensual pleasures. Here the Buddha says, remind yourself that there are other levels of being where the pleasures are a lot better. In his contemplation of the sensuality as we experience it on the human level, the various analogies he gives for how sensuality is unsatisfying and dangerous are good to keep in mind: the chain of bones the dog is gnawing on; a little lump of flesh that a hawk has carried off and other hawks are going to go after it because it has the flesh and they want it; a drop of honey on a knife edge; borrowed goods. It’s good to keep the drawbacks of sensuality in mind because sensual pleasures are dangerous. Sensual desires are going to drive you to go into dangerous places.

As the Buddha gave instructions to Mahanama, he said that if someone is dying, remind him that there are better pleasures than the human realm. Have him think about the pleasures of the devas. Have him imagine the various levels,

with each of the levels replete with sensual pleasures a lot more refined than on the lower levels.

At the very least, you don't want to be stuck on the pleasures you're going to leave behind. Realize that there are many higher levels of happiness. Beyond the sensual pleasures, there's the pleasure of concentration. If you've had some experience with concentration, that's where you want to go. If you can't manage anything higher than that, try to gain a sense of being still with a sense of ease that doesn't have to depend on sensual pleasures. That can help wean you off the fear that you're going to be missing out on nice tastes and nice sights and sounds and smells, whatever.

The third reason for fear of death is thinking back on your life and realizing you've done some cruel things, harmful things, and you're afraid that there's going to be punishment for that. As the Buddha pointed out, there's no need to be punished. There are lots of cases where people do unskillful things in this lifetime and yet they have good rebirth in the next. It's because their minds have been trained in the meantime and they have other good karma. So you can counteract your past bad karma.

This is one of the reasons why, as death approaches, it's a general Buddhist custom to have people think of the good things they've done—not the good times they've had, the good things they've done in terms of being generous and virtuous. That gives them the confidence that if they suddenly see a vision of a hell or something, they don't have to go there.

The final reason for fear of death is that you haven't seen the true Dhamma. You don't know for yourself directly that there is a deathless dimension to the mind. This is the most important of the four because people can tell you about, "This is how you approach death. This is how you deal with your fears about losing the body; losing sensual pleasures; fears about unskillful things you've done in the past. You don't have to worry about those things." You can hear about it and you can have conviction in it, but there may be part of the mind that's not 100 percent there—and that can change very quickly, the little bit of percentage that's not fully on board with this.

If you've seen the deathless, though, you know that there is the deathless dimension. You also know that this lifetime was not the only lifetime you've had, because when you see the deathless, you're stepping out of time for a while. In stepping out of time, you see that the time you've been aware and conscious, and your consciousness has been feeding and going from one place to another, is a lot longer than just this particular lifetime. When you see that, that's the end of your real fear of death as it pertains to what happens after death.

So that's what we want to work on as we meditate: to get the mind to the point where it knows for itself and can confirm for itself that there is a deathless and that death is not the end; that the skills you've been developing as you've been meditating really will make a difference.

Up until that point, you have to take it on faith. It's a matter of conviction. The ajaans keep saying, "Believe this. Believe this." They can't prove it for you, but they've proven it for themselves.

So try to get to the point in your meditation where you can prove it for yourself, too. It'll make a huge difference as death approaches. You can approach it with a lot more confidence. We talk a lot about using the skills of meditation in daily life. Actually, though, they're for all aspects of life, even the big events in life, including aging, illness, and death. These skills can really look after the well-being of the mind regardless of what happens to the body.