

Think Calmly about Death

July 6, 2016

We meditate so that we can be more skillful in the way we live—but also so that we can be more skillful in the way we die.

Death, after all, is a part of life. Once there's birth, it's written in the contract. There's going to be some aging and some illness and then finally death.

We don't like to think about that. But the problem is that the less you think about it, the less prepared you'll be when it comes.

It's like knowing that you're going to be forcibly evicted from your house and yet not making any preparations for where you're going to go or how you're going to go, how you're going to find new shelter. What happens, of course, is that you end up making do with whatever. You suddenly find yourself living under pieces of cardboard. But if you're prepared, then it's not all that difficult.

So it's good to think about death every day. As the Buddha said, think about death with every in-and-out breath—not to get morbid, but simply to remind yourself that the time you have right now is valuable and you want to use it well. Train the mind so that it's not shaken by things.

Every day, he said, when the sun sets, remind yourself, "This could be the last time you see the sun. Are you ready to go?" And usually the answer is No.

So, okay, what's going to get in the way? What unskillful qualities are going to be burdens on the mind? What unskillful attitudes are going to be obstacles for the mind? Work on those.

The same when the sun rises. Tell yourself, "I could die today. Death can come very easily. Are you ready to go?" If not, work on the qualities that need to be worked on.

Fortunately, they're not much different from what you're doing right now: trying to stay with one object and not let yourself get distracted by other things. At the time of death, fears will come up. Thoughts of desperation will come up: missing this person, missing that. Fear for the future. All these things will come up and you'll have to be able to plow right through them, not let them take over.

When you see courageous people, it's not that they don't feel fear. They feel fear but they don't let it take over. You have to rewire yourself so when the thought of death comes, you don't feel desperate.

In Thailand, when people are startled, they tend to say, *taai laew*, which means basically "I'm dead"—which is one of the most useless things you could be thinking when you get startled. When something startles you, you immediately

want to get your bearings so that you can figure out, “Okay, what’s actually happened here?”

Then try to draw on your fund of memory. How have you dealt with situations like this in the past? This is why mindfulness is *so* important when difficult situations arise. Yet when they arise suddenly, it’s one of the first things that goes out the window. The mind becomes a blank. It can’t remember anything.

So you’ve got to practice ahead of time. Learn how to breathe calmly and then work your way up to thoughts of dangers.

Years back, when I was in college, my name got drawn to be part of a psych experiment. Fortunately, it was after I’d started meditating, and the experiment was very closely related to meditation. It involved dealing with fear. I was asked to identify something that would put a lot of fear into me, a fear that I wanted to overcome.

I had a problem playing piano in front of people. So I said, “Okay, imagine myself sitting at the stage in a concert hall, playing the piano in front of a hall full of people.” That was ten on the scale. Then I was asked to go back and work on one, two, three, four, five, up to ten.

I started out by imagining myself playing with just a couple of friends present in the room, and then going up to more hostile and more difficult environments until I finally got to the concert stage.

The practice was to visualize One and then breathe calmly as you visualized it. And then visualize Two and breathe calmly as you visualized that. And if you found you got to a stage where you couldn’t breathe calmly, you’d back up. Then keep at this every day.

After a while, I got so that I overcame my fear of playing in front of people. It didn’t mean that I could play well. And I never did get on a concert stage. But at least I was okay about playing with other people within listening range.

You can apply this same principle to a lot of things, but fear of death is Eleven on any scale. You’ve got to learn how to think calmly about death. It’s going to come. The moment will come where it’s here in the present moment. You’ll say, “Oh, this is it!” And you’ve got to be prepared to let go of everything.

So this practice of meditation, where we’re letting go of our thoughts of past, letting go of our thoughts of the future: That’s a really useful skill right there. That’s a major part of your preparation.

But then there are special fears that come up around death. The Buddha identified four. First is fear that you’re going to be losing your body. The second is fear that you’re going to be missing human sensual pleasures. The third is fear that you’re going to be punished after death for unskillful and cruel things you may

have done. And then the fourth one is the fear that comes from not having seen the true Dhamma. You can work with the other three, but as long as you haven't reached stream entry, there'll always be a question in the mind, "Is there really, as the Buddha said, life after death?"

I was just reading the other day, some blogger who identified himself as Buddhist saying, "Well, now that they've proven that there is no life after death, you can forget about that issue and just strike it out of the Buddha's teachings." His argument was based on the premise that you are the body, and the mind is the brain. That was it. When the brain gets smashed or simply doesn't work anymore, that's it. That's the end of you.

But it's certainly not what the Buddha taught. As he saw, consciousness doesn't need to depend on the body. It can depend on craving. He said it's like a fire going from one house to another. The fire goes on the oxygen in the wind and then there it is, in the other house. In the same way, your consciousness doesn't have to depend on the house of this body. It can depend on the wind of craving to take it to another one.

You hear that, and if you haven't really seen the true Dhamma—i.e., you haven't gained the Dhamma-eye that comes with your first glimpse of awakening—there will always be a little bit of doubt. But then you look at the people who have gone before you on this path, the people who really have gained awakening. You see they're all very reliable people, all very solid people, people with a lot of integrity. They're worthy of trust.

So even though this point may not be confirmed for you, keep reminding yourself, "You are not the body." *Rupam anattā*: "Form is not-self." The same with all the other aggregates.

But the question is, "When you leave these things, where are you going to go?" As long as there's craving, you don't have to worry about having nowhere to go. There's always going to be more destinations, because craving creates all these things. It, together with clinging, creates the becomings into which you take birth. The question is, is it going to create good ones or bad ones?

This is where it's good to think about your addiction to sensual pleasures. As we practice concentration, we get the mind into a different kind of pleasure. When it finally does settle down with the breath and there's a sense of really belonging here in the body, that's a different order of pleasure, and it's much better than sensual pleasure. It puts you on a wavelength where—if you happened to die at this moment and didn't lose this sense of being centered right here—you'd go to a really good place.

So learn how to appreciate this pleasure and see it as higher and better and

more reliable than the pleasures that come from sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. That allows you to think more calmly about the fact that you could go.

As for unskillful things you've done in the past: The Buddha says that your attitude in the present moment is your protection from them. They may give their results, but if your attitude is right, you don't have to suffer from them.

The right attitude basically comes from developing virtue, concentration, and discernment—and particularly concentration around the brahmaviharas, the sublime attitudes. Learn how to make your mind spacious. Have goodwill for all beings.

There was the time when the Buddha had a wound in his foot. Devadatta had tried to kill him by rolling a rock off of a mountain, and a long splinter of rock had pierced his foot. Mara came up to him as he was lying there recovering and said, "Are you're moping here?" The Buddha said, "I'm not moping. I'm extending sympathy to all beings."

That's how you deal with times when the body is ill. Sympathy for all, goodwill for all: These are good attitudes to have practiced when the time comes to go. They are among the attitudes you can depend on.

Your universal goodwill and compassion and empathetic joy and equanimity will give you just the right tools you need at that point. Because the mind's going to need to be unshaken, and yet death is what shakes us up more than anything else.

So you've got to practice so that there does come the day when you actually do gain that glimpse of the true Dhamma and you say, "Okay, there is this deathless element that you can touch with the mind." It's not touched by any change in the world at all because it's outside of time.

Once you see that, it reduces your fear of death considerably. At the same time, it does reduce your number of deaths considerably.

As the Buddha said, once you've gained that realization, the amount of suffering left to you is like the dirt under a fingernail, as opposed to the dirt in the entire Earth for those who haven't gained that awakening.

So this is how we practice learning how to think about death—to think calmly about death—and to develop our mindfulness so that these calm thoughts we've had about death will help us when the actual event comes.

If you see any of these areas where you're still attached—attached to the body, attached to sensual pleasures, attached to fear over your own past actions—okay, work on thinking about these issues in the right way so that they don't become a burden as you're trying to deal skillfully with one of the most difficult things in

life, which is how it ends.

When you can think more skillfully about death, that helps you to deal with other things that cause fear. Because you realize the main problem is not the physical dangers out there, it's what the mind can do to itself. If the mind just goes blank, your mindfulness isn't there to help you, and nothing can help you at that point. So you've got to learn how not to go blank.

Learn how to think about the things that cause fear. Study them so that you have some knowledge. And develop the mindfulness that'll keep that knowledge at your fingertips when you need it.

That's how you prepare.