

Skills for Dying Well

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It's a recurring theme in the teachings of the ajans that the skills you learn while you meditate are for use not only while you are sitting here with your eyes closed but also as you go through life—and they're for use as you die as well. The skills that you gain in learning to keep the mind in one spot, to peel it away from distractions, will be extremely useful at that point; but the word 'skill' here means not only techniques but also attitudes, qualities of your character. These get developed in the meditation and they'll be useful at that time, too.

In terms of techniques: As the Buddha said, you want to learn how to see things as separate. We've heard so much about how wisdom see the oneness, the inter-connectedness of all things; but the Buddha himself said that wisdom lies in seeing things as separate. Your awareness is one thing, your breath is something else, other thoughts coming into the mind are something else—and it's good to be able to see those distinctions.

In the beginning, though, as you work with the breath, you want to get the breath and your awareness together to the point where they seem to be one and the same thing. But you still want to see your distractions as separate, realizing that they're like a different world. You go into them and you've lost your body, you've lost your reference to the breath. You're in a different world with different values. And as you're sitting here meditating, it may not seem all that serious that your mind is wandering off, but when you die you don't want your mind wandering around aimlessly at all. You want to keep it focused and on target. You want to keep it, as they say, "with the program." In other words, you want to keep it in line with your intention that you want to die well. And so you focus it on the breath as a means of maintaining that intention.

There will come a point, though, where it's difficult to stay with the breath as the breath gets more labored and more difficult. This is why, as you're working with your meditation here, you eventually want to get to the point where the breath is still and you see that your sense of the body is something that you put together. It's a construct, it's a fabrication, whereas your awareness is something else.

If you can get the mind still to the point where the breath energies in the body seem still, you'll want to notice the sense of the boundary of the body that distinguishes where the body ends and space outside begins, and you want to get to the point where that boundary begins to dissolve away.

Then you're left with what feels like a cloud of little sensation dots arising and passing away, arising and passing away. You learn how to stay with that cloud for a while and then you begin to notice that between those sensation dots there's space.

Focus on the space. Forget about any perceptions that you have about the body, and there's just space. You begin to realize that that space doesn't have any boundaries. If you stay with it long enough—if it's solid enough, that perception of space—then you can turn to look at what is the awareness that's aware of space. That's something else. That's what you want to be focus on as your die; just that sense of awareness that's not fabricating any thoughts, that's not even fabricating a sense of the body.

There may be pains coming and going but you don't have to turn those pains into a sense that "Well, this is my body in pain right now." They're just pains—or even better, just sensations—but you want to learn how to see them as separate.

This is why we talk so much in meditation about not only separating yourself from distractions but also separating yourself from pains or separating your awareness from pains. The pain can be there, but you're not sucked into the pain. This will be an extremely useful skill, because pain and distraction are the two things that cause the most trouble in meditation, and they're also the two things that will cause the most trouble as you're about to leave the body.

If we latch onto the pains, there's going to be a sense of desperation, a sense of being threatened, a sense that you can't stand this any longer—but that's because of the perceptions you have around the pain. You want to learn how to change those perceptions. Question the perceptions you have around the pain so that you can begin to see how you're actually putting together the sensation of pain from some raw materials that are there, but you can leave those raw materials alone. You can stop making the perceptions. That's when the pain begins to separate out. You can be simply with the awareness.

And as you're more aware like this, you can direct your mind where you want it to go.

Certain options will open up at that time. In some cases, they'll come as visions where you see another place where you might go. If you're feeling that you're being pushed out of the body, you'll jump to whatever appears. But if you realize that your perception of the body is something that's falling apart, then you can remember that you've grown used to taking this perception of the body apart so you don't feel quite so threatened, you don't feel quite so disoriented. You've learned how to see the body as one thing, your perception of the body as something else, and your awareness as something else. Then you're going to feel

less threatened and less pushed out of the body. You'll have some choice as to where you want to go. These choices will depend on your past karma but they'll also depend upon your attitude—and this is where the question of your character comes in, the character you develop as you mediate.

There are three qualities that the Buddha talks about as the ones that led to his awakening. They're the same three qualities that are often mentioned with regard to monks who've listened to the Buddha's teachings and then have gone off to practice and attain arahantship. The three qualities are heedfulness, resolution, and ardency.

Heedfulness is realizing that your actions have consequences and the choices you make will make a difference. Sometimes heedfulness sounds scary, in that you have to be aware of dangers, but it's also talking about opportunities. If your actions didn't make a difference, there would be nothing but bad, bad, bad. But, your actions *will* make a difference, which means that there are good things that you can bring about through the way you think, the way you act, the way you talk. And it's good to remember that death is not the end. There will be something that follows on death, so you want to be heedful where you focus your attention, where you focus your desires at that point.

This quality of heedfulness is something that we try to develop in the meditation. As the Buddha said, all skillful qualities are rooted in heedfulness. It's when you realize that your actions really will make a difference that you put more attention into trying to make sure that they're skillful. This should be a quality that we develop every time we meditate.

Resolution is a quality you have to develop in the face of adversity, in the face of difficulties. This, too, is an important part of the meditation and it'll be very important as the body is beginning to fall apart. The parts that used to work are not working well anymore, and the mind is in the midst of a lot of very confusing and unfamiliar physical sensations. You have to make sure that you're not scared of these things, that you don't feel threatened or weak in the face of them. You've made up your mind you're going to stay with the breath, you're going to stay with your sense of space, stay with the sense of awareness—and be prepared for the fact that there will be difficulties. It's like going through a storm. Be prepared for the fact that the wind will blow you around a little bit, but you're going to try to stand fast, stand solidly.

As we're working on the meditation, we read in the books that the steps of meditation go 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, very smoothly. But anybody who has tried meditating realizes that there are going to be difficulties and setbacks along the way. We occasionally read of ajaans or people in the Canon who very quickly, without

much effort, were able to attain awakening, but those are the exceptions. For all the rest of us, it's going to require that we face difficulties and not be afraid of them, not be discouraged by them. Be prepared. Some of the big difficulties when you're dying come from the outside—relatives, friends who are quite upset—but you can't let their attitude affect your mind. And then of course the mind's own thoughts may be running out of control. In cases like that, you simply have to say, "I have to let that go. I can't identify with that. I can't let that have an influence on me." And you learn how to stand fast.

Finally, ardency is the effort to do this well. Don't believe the people who say that there is no such thing as a good or a bad meditation. There are good or bad meditations, and you want your meditation to be good. And that's going to depend on your skill, the effort you put in, the discernment you put in, all the good qualities that are needed: mindfulness, concentration, conviction, all the other strengths that the Buddha teaches. You want to develop those strengths and you want to see that it's worthwhile to do so.

If you believe that death is the end, then why bother? But if you realize that, in terms of where you go after death, there is such a thing as a good death and there is such a thing as a bad death, and you want it to be good, that gives rise to ardency. After all, when death comes, it doesn't come with a notice ahead of time. It'll come as a surprise. You realize suddenly that you can't stay here any longer. So you always have to be ready for when the surprise comes. Tell yourself, "I've been meditating for the sake of doing this well, so here goes." Then drop everything else and do it well.

The Buddha has an image of a person with his head on fire. He says that if that happened to you, you'd put all your ardency and resolution and relentlessness and mindfulness into putting the fire out as quickly as possible. Well it's the same way when the body is dying. It's like a house on fire. You know that you can't put the fire in the body out, but you do want to put out the fires in the mind: the fires of greed, aversion, and delusion. You want to put out your confusion.

And you want to do this well. So at a time like that, you drop all your other thoughts, your concerns about other people, your concerns about your future, your regrets about the past. Tell yourself, "See? Here I've been meditating all this time, and here's the test." And you want yourself to be, as we say in English, "up for the test." In other words, you encourage yourself, "Okay, now is the time to do it well," and carry it through.

So dying well is a combination of techniques that you learn in meditation along with qualities of the mind, qualities of the heart that you develop through meditation. And as we meditate on the breath, it means that we have these things

associated with the breath. So as you begin to realize that the end is near, the breath will be right there and hopefully you'll have these associations with the breath: the skills you learned about separating things out, the attitude you learned about being heedful, resolute, ardent. You want all of them to gather together to help you. And if you develop them now, you'll have a good chance that they'll be there for you then.