

Bedside Dhamma

March 21, 2019

Meditation develops two qualities: discernment, which helps you to know the right thing to do; and concentration, which gives you the strength to do it. These are qualities we develop as we're sitting here. And we use them throughout our lives. The more we can develop them here, and the more we're conscious of the fact that we can take these qualities and apply them to our lives, the more we're going to benefit. The people around us will benefit as well.

We were talking this afternoon about caring for people who are old, sick, dying. And that's an area where you particularly need to have both discernment and concentration, both for their sake and for yours. Your first concern, as you're dealing with people like this, should be the state of their mind, because their mind state is going to determine not only how they handle the problem of pain in the present, but also where they're going to go when they find they can no longer stay in the body.

The Buddha's advice for taking care of someone who's on his or her deathbed is that the first thing you ask the person is if they have any worries. Of course, the big worry is the fact that they're going to die. The Buddha said there are four reasons that people fear death. One is that they're afraid of losing the body; two, they're afraid of losing the sensual pleasures they've had; and three, they may be thinking of some unskillful things—some cruel things even—that they've done in the past, and they're afraid they're going to meet up with punishment. Then the fourth reason is they haven't seen the deathless. In other words, they don't realize that there is something in the mind that doesn't die, so there's always going to be the fear that death will be annihilation.

Even though people don't talk about their fear of death, that's always there in the background. You notice when old people get delirious, demented, or really difficult to be with, a lot of it comes from the fact that they're afraid. So you've got to do your best to allay their fears. One of the Buddha's pieces of advice is to ask the person if they're worried about something. And if they say they are, then you say, "There's nothing you can do about it; you're dying." They may not want to hear that, but that should bring them to their senses that they don't get wound up in those issues.

We had an old man dying at the monastery in Thailand. His various faculties were going, going, going. Then one day, a group of people came up the side of the hill, cutting trees and burning them, moving into the monastery property.

Somehow he got wind of this. And I don't know where he got the strength, but he sat up in his bed and started yelling at them. We tried to calm him down, saying, "Look, don't worry about the trees. Worry about your state of mind right now," because the state of mind is going to determine everything.

So try to allay the person's fears in whatever ways you can, and allay the person's worries. Even if the person doesn't believe in rebirth, say, "Well, just in case. If you find yourself going someplace, be very careful to choose where you're going." Because the time comes when you have to leave the body, and the mind will just jump at anything. There's a sense you can't stay here any longer, and so you look for a way out.

Images will appear. Partly, they will depend on whatever karma the person has, and also what the person's been thinking about. This is one of reasons why it's always good to remind the person of the good things he or she did during this life—not so much the good times they had, because that can start getting them sad—just the goodness they did: the times they were very generous, the times when they held by their principles. Have them keep those things in mind because those thoughts will protect them.

When they've been thinking about the unskillful things they've done, and then something really miserable opens up, and they feel, "Oh, here's my punishment coming to get me," they just go into it, where they don't have to. The types of karma where you have to go to hell, say, after this lifetime are very few. But if the mind is down, then that down state of mind can pull the person down.

So you've got to do what you can to lift the person's spirits. Of course, this will depend on how cogent they are, how alert they are, exactly what you can get across to the person. I found in the case of my father that we put on some slow movements from Brahms orchestral and chamber works, and they kept him calm. We weren't able to communicate with him the last several days in any other way. So the music was on. Whatever you can do to calm the person down and lift the person's spirits, do that, because the person will be facing the most difficult issue in life, which is how to die.

Now, dying is something that's very easy in one sense; you can do it very quickly. But dying well is hard. The body is weak at that point. The mind, if it hasn't been trained, tends to weaken in line with the body. So you want to do what you can to help you with that person's mental strength, however you can communicate with the person.

It's helpful that you maintain your calm. This is where the practice in concentration comes in. If you can maintain your solidity, you can maintain your equanimity in spite of what the person does or says, and in spite of the course of

the illness. You're meeting up with a very clear lesson in the things that are beyond our control, and you've got to learn how to maintain your equanimity in the face of that. The purpose of this, of course, is so that you can focus on areas where you *can* help, and can maintain your strength so that you have some stamina, both so you can be there for that person and so you can get some good Dhamma lessons out of this. If the person hasn't been meditating, you'll begin to see very clearly that this is what happens to a mind that hasn't been trained. It's a good lesson for you to be very active in training your mind so that when you face the same problem, you'll be better prepared.

So whatever discernment, whatever concentration you develop as you practice, remember it's there to be put to use. And it *can* be put to use. My teacher had a student who had extremely strong powers of concentration, but she felt somehow that doing the concentration would take care of all her problems. So she didn't even try to apply her discernment in daily life. Then she complained to my teacher that she didn't see her anger was getting any less. In fact, it seemed to be getting worse. The stronger her powers of concentration and the more focused her mind, the stronger the anger.

That, as my teacher said, was because she wasn't trying to apply things. She just thought that somehow, magically, the practice of concentration would seep into the rest of her life without her trying to apply it. It doesn't work that way. You have to realize you have these strengths, and you can apply them. It's like a person who goes down to the gym and gets really strong lifting weights, and then doesn't think of using his strength in any useful way, doesn't lift a finger to help when he goes back home. The strength is there, but it goes to waste.

So make sure that your concentration and your discernment are brought to bear as you go throughout the day, both with the little issues of the day and the big issues that come up in life. All too often, the big issues carry a lot of emotional wallop. We tend to forget things. We tend to forget the strengths that we have.

Remember that the powers you develop, the strengths you develop as you meditate, both in concentration and discernment, are there to be used. So do the best to develop them here so that you have a lot to use out there, wherever you go.