

Determined to Be Undefeated by Death

August 26, 2019

Sometimes when you come to meditate and you tell the mind to stay with the breath, it's pretty obedient. It settles down. It's happy to be here. And sometimes it's not. When it's not, that's when you have to be determined to get it to settle down. And there are four steps to a good determination.

The first is that you use your discernment: Remind yourself of why it's good to settle down, the benefits of getting the mind to rest and to have a chance to see itself clearly as it's reflected in the breath, and whatever other ways you can think will make yourself want to stay here.

The second step is that you're true to your determination. Other things may come up: planning for tomorrow, thinking about today. And you have to tell yourself, "No. I'm going to stay right here with the breath, follow it all the way in, all the way out, develop a sense of interest and a sense of commitment."

After all, you've made up your mind to do something good: to get the mind under control. So show some loyalty to that determination because it's a determination on your side. As Ajaan Lee used to say, "The different voices in your mind, the ones that tell you to do things that are for your own good, those are the ones you should identify with." As for the ones that would lead you astray, just tell yourself, "Those are the worms going through my blood system right now." They have to pass through the brain. They may leave a few ideas there before they head on to some other part of the body. They don't have your interest in mind. In other words, you don't have to identify with every thought that comes running through the mind. Maybe it comes from someplace else. You want to stay true to what is your own good determination, your own good intention, what you know would be good for yourself in the long run.

Now to be true in this way requires that you let go of other things. That's the third step: that you're willing to give up your entertainment for right now. The thoughts that you like to play with, tell them you can play some other time. This is the time to do work.

And then the fourth step is to calm the mind. You do this by breathing in a way that feels good or thinking thoughts of goodwill. Anything comes up in the mind that deals with people who are difficult in your life—family, people at work—just spread thoughts of goodwill to them. May they be happy, remembering that goodwill doesn't mean you have to spend a lot of time with them. Sometimes

the best thing for some people is that you go your separate ways or at least find some time out. But if you do it with an attitude of goodwill, it's perfectly fine.

Otherwise, when the mind settles down and things of the day, or things of the past week, the past month start coming up and you think of so-and-so who did this and so-and-so who did that, and they become "that so-and-so," then you get all entangled. Or there may be worries about what somebody might do or what might happen to somebody that you love. Tell yourself, if you really want to be helpful to them, that you've got to develop your mind. In other words, think in ways that are calming, that incline the mind to want to settle down.

So you use your discernment. You're true. You give up things that are uninvolved with the meditation. This is reflected in the Buddha's instructions on how to be mindful and concentrated. You stay with the breath in and of itself, ardently. That's the truth of your character. You put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That's the letting go. Try to calm the mind, calm the breath, calm the perceptions you're holding in mind right now, and the mind will settle down because you're determined, and you're determined in the right way.

Now as I often say, when you meditate, you're preparing how to grow ill, how to age, and how to die without suffering. And that will require the same kind of determination. As we live, we live dependent on strength of body and strength of mind. But strength of body is going to deteriorate, and it does it without asking permission, and it does it without warning you. It's not going to tell you, "Tomorrow you're not going to have use of your knee." It just happens. Then you get it back for a while. But you have to take that as a warning signal: It could go again. The things you used to be able to do, sometimes you can do them, but you find that it takes longer and longer to recover. And so bit by bit, the strength of the body goes. But the strength of the mind doesn't have to go.

If you're determined, if you use those four steps in determination that you've developed as you've learned how to get the mind to settle down, you find that they're really helpful as you deal with the issues that are going to come up as you approach death.

First off, discernment: realizing that the thoughts that you cling to in the mind are the ones that are really going to be making a difference in where your mind is going to go. So you want to be very picky about which thoughts you hold onto and which thoughts you let go.

As the Buddha says, when you're dying, the first thing you have to let go of is your worries about other people in the family, people you've been responsible for. You have to let them go, because at that point there's nothing you can do. And being worried about them simply ties the mind down. Secondly, being worried

about yourself: You have to be confident that if you've done good in this life and you hold on to that sense of goodness, it can take you far.

As for your concerns about the pleasures of your family, the pleasures of human existence, the Buddha says there are other levels that have better pleasures than this, so don't hang on here. And ideally you should be able to look at that part of the mind that's hanging on, hanging on, hanging on and ask, "Does it have to hang on anywhere at all? Can't the mind be independent?" That's the ideal way to die, not being defeated by death.

So many people go through life defeated by life and defeated by death. You see them as they get older: they seem to shrink, shrink, shrink—and not just physically. Their minds and their hearts just get smaller and smaller. That's being defeated. You want to age, grow old and die in a way that's victorious. In other words, things can happen to the body, but the mind doesn't have to suffer from them. That's its victory.

So those are the lessons of discernment.

Then you use the skills you've developed as a meditator to be true to those lessons. A lot of unexpected things are going to come. Aging has its surprises. Illness has its surprises. Now, the simple fact of these things should not be surprising, but their particulars are usually not the things you've planned for. I don't know how many people have suffered from a recurring illness throughout life and then they die of something else. Or they make all kinds of plans about how they want to go and then it happens some other way. So you want to develop the qualities that enable you to deal with the unexpected: You're true to the breath. You're true to your focus here in the present moment.

And you let go of anything that's going to pull you away. Of course the breath itself will stop at some point. But by that point, you should have gotten to know your mind. The mind is where you want to focus. Put aside all your other cares and responsibilities. Make sure the state of your mind is in good shape.

And then keep yourself calm, realizing the death of the body is not the death of the mind, so don't identify with what's happening to the body. You notice it, you're aware of it, you watch it, take it as a good Dhamma lesson: These things, too, pass away. But there's something in the mind that doesn't die. The more you've been meditating, the clearer that will become.

So the skills you develop—the determination to get the mind to settle down and all the qualities that go along with that determination: Those are the skills that will see you in good stead. As the strength of the body goes, you substitute that with strength of the mind. And that will see you through.