

Preparing for Death

April 27, 2020

We're prisoners of time more than we are of space. With space, we have some leeway. If we don't like where we are, we can move to another point in space. But when you're in one point in time, you can't go to another point.

We feel this especially as death approaches. If people could, they would run in the other direction. And in their minds they try. They go running back to events in this lifetime, trying to grab hold of this, grab hold of that. That's why they die with craving and clinging, which moves them on to another rebirth. And because it's done in desperation, often we grab hold of the wrong things.

One of the purposes of meditating is to learn how to die well. To die with skill. To get prepared beforehand. To know where to focus our attention, what to hold on to, if we have to hold on. Where we can let go. That way, we're not so desperate. In other words, we go into death without trying to run away.

The importance of this skill is obvious, especially now with death all around us. As the Buddha points out, there are four reasons why people are afraid of death. They're afraid of missing out on human sensual pleasures. They're afraid of leaving their bodies. They start thinking of the cruel and unkind things they've done in this lifetime, and they're afraid there may be some punishment waiting for them on the other side. Or they're simply unsure: Is death followed by annihilation? If not, what is it followed by? In other words, in the Buddha's terms, they haven't seen the true Dhamma.

It's in the triple training that we learn the skills that can overcome these fears—and not only overcome the fears, but also to master the tools we're going to need to die well.

As we practice virtue, we avoid cruel behavior, the kind of thing that might deserve punishment someplace. We look back on our actions and can see that there's nothing with which we can criticize ourselves. That sense of confidence is going to be important as we approach death.

As you're leaving the body and the human realm, the practice of concentration is good for fears around leaving the sensual pleasures of the human realm. We've learned through concentration that there is a pleasure that doesn't require sensuality at all. In fact, you can experience that pleasure only when you put sensuality off to the side. Think of the definition of right concentration: "secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities." You find pleasure and rapture based on that seclusion.

So as you're focused here on the breath, the pleasure that comes when the breath flows well doesn't count as a sensual pleasure. It's a pleasure of form. It's a higher level of pleasure. It doesn't have all the drawbacks of sensuality. It has a few drawbacks: It is, after all, something fabricated. But it's fabricated with skill, fabricated with knowledge. It's the kind of pleasure that doesn't require that you deny the harm that you may be caused in the search for this pleasure, because there is no harm. And it doesn't obscure the workings of the mind.

When you're dealing with sensual pleasures, you're focused totally on the object. You don't like to think of the machinations that go into creating the allure of sensuality. It's like watching a play. You don't want to think about all the machinations behind the scenes that require the scenery to work. You want to go for the illusion of reality in a play. Sensuality requires that we maintain that illusion. Whereas with the mind in concentration, even though there is a lot of pleasure, it doesn't require that you turn a blind eye to what you did to get the pleasure. In fact, you can see it even more clearly.

So concentration helps to get over that craving for human sensuality.

As for fear of losing the body, when the mind really settles down, the sense of the awareness that comes here, right here in the present moment, becomes more and more pronounced, to the point where the awareness of the breath actually separates out from the breath. In the beginning, we work to put these things together: breath, body, a feeling of pleasure. We want the pleasure to fill the body; we want our awareness of breath to fill the body. They're all there together. They develop a sense of Oneness, especially as you can drop the directed thought and evaluation. You're just there with that sense of perceiving the breath, aware of the breath, and the mind and its object seem to become one.

But the paradox here is that as they become one, eventually they will separate out again, but this time they separate out not in line with your preconceived notions, but simply by their very nature. They're there together still, like oil and water in a bottle, but as they settle down and are still, the water separates to one side, the oil to the other.

Then you can focus directly on the awareness itself. You can focus on a sense of space; you can focus on awareness itself. There seem to be no bounds to them. You realize that this pleasure is even greater than the pleasure that came from being with the breath. It's more peaceful, more spacious. This helps overcome your attachment to the body. You realize that it is possible to be aware and blissful and not to have to think about body at all.

This ability to separate these things out is *the* skill you're going to need as death comes. In Ajaan Maha Boowa's teachings to the woman who was dying of cancer,

this was a teaching he repeated over and over again: Try to get so that you can see the body as one thing, feeling as something else, your awareness as something else. That way, when feelings of pain come with death, you can go to that sense of being separate. The awareness will realize, as the body falls away, that it hasn't lost anything. As the feelings fall away, it hasn't lost anything. It doesn't have to depend on those things or go into them.

This ability to separate these things out is the skill that's going to enable you to see the true Dhamma, because you end up with no doubts about what happens at death. It's in seeing the true Dhamma that you actually do step out of space and time. And in stepping out, you begin to realize that the amount of time you've been through didn't begin back in 1949, in 1955, in 1964, or whatever the year you were born this time around. It goes way, way back. And you realize that what kept you going from one life to the next, the next, and the next, were your unskillful actions. What prevented you from seeing the true Dhamma were your unskillful actions.

This is why people who come back from the experience of stream entry would never want to break the precepts ever again. They have no doubts about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, because they see that what the Buddha taught is true: There is a deathless element. It's an awareness. It's not quite the same awareness as the awareness in concentration, but it's an awareness that can be accessed by learning the skill of separating body, feelings, and mind: those first three of the frames of reference in establishing mindfulness. This is a skill that enables you to step beyond and totally overcome your fear of death. When you're not afraid of it, you'll be able to handle death well.

So try to develop a heightened sense of the value of the triple training: what the Buddha calls training in heightened virtue, heightened awareness, heightened discernment. That's because they really do take the mind to another level. They're probably *the* most basic teaching in the Buddha's arsenal, and the reason they're basic is because they're so useful in so many ways, especially when dealing with the big issues of life and death: learning how to stop the suffering we've been creating for ourselves, and releasing us from this prison in time.