

## *Death World*

*November 13, 2020*

Death Valley got its name because so many people died as they tried to go through it. But not everybody died. If we were to go by percentages, it would be even more appropriate to call this Death World. Nobody gets out of the world without dying. Think of that as a name for an amusement park: Death World. People actually try to treat the world as an amusement park, trying to enjoy the roller coaster rides of fame and the Ferris wheel of fortune. But it's an amusement park in which you die in the course of at least one of the rides.

The Buddha talks about two kinds of death. There's the inevitable death, as in the chant, "I'm subject to death, haven't gone beyond it." That's the death of the body. But what really matters for the Buddha is the question of the survival of your goodness: the goodness of your heart, the goodness of your mind. The death of that is not inevitable.

This is one of the reasons why we practice: to take this potential for keeping our goodness alive and nurture it so that when the time comes and we do have to leave the world, our goodness doesn't die, and it hasn't died in the meantime.

One of the reflections the Buddha recommends is a reflection on kamma. You can reflect on the fact that you yourself are subject to kamma—you're the owner of your actions, heir to your actions—and then there's the reflection all beings are owners of their actions. These reflections serve different purposes. The one on your being the owner of your actions is for giving rise to heedfulness. That, the Buddha says, is precisely the quality that keeps your goodness alive. It's because of heedfulness that we think about being skillful in our actions, as we think about the consequences of what we're doing.

There's a passage when he talks about how we can give rise to desire, aversion, delusion very easily if we don't think about the consequences of those things. We should stop and think: "What will be the consequences if I give in to this desire? Or if I focus on things that would give rise to the desire, in such a way that aggravates the desire? The consequences are not going to be good." Seeing that is what enables you to step back from the desire and not identify with it—or not be joined to it, as the Buddha said. Because when you're joined to something like that, the word they use in Pali is very similar to the word for fetter. When you're joined to a desire like that, you're fettered by it, and it drags you around.

But simply being able to step back and think, "What are the consequences of this action? What are the long-term results?" gives rise to heedfulness. That's

something you want to nurture. It's one of the reasons we have that reflection so often. The Buddha actually recommends that you do it every day. So whatever you do, you're conscious of the fact that you're choosing to do actions, and those actions are going to have results.

Most often we go through the world, looking not at our own actions but at what other people are doing, and then we react. We feel that our reaction is a natural response, built into the way things are: When people do outrageous things, we feel we're bound to get angry. But as the Buddha said, whether they're outrageous or not, your reaction is still your kamma. You have to look at it that way.

So you have to ask yourself, "What kind of action would be skillful in a case like this?" It's not the first thought that often comes to us. When you look around at the world, it's hard to say, "It's a wonderful world, everything's fine, therefore I'm going to be good." You have to realize that, ok, even though the world is a mess, and people are doing all kinds of horrible things to make it messier, still, for your own sake, you have to ask yourself, "What kind of actions can I do right now that would lead to good long-term results?" That's what you're responsible for, and that's what you're going to have to live with.

So regardless of what other people do, you've got to make sure that you're in control of your choices. That's one the reasons why we have that reflection on "I am the owner of my actions." It's to keep our heedfulness alive. As the Buddha said, those who are heedful don't die, those who are heedless are as if already dead. Their goodness has died. Even before their bodies have died, their goodness has died. And you don't want to be one of those.

Then there's the reflection on how all beings are the owners of their actions, and that serves two purposes. One is for equanimity. As in the chant just now, when we chant for the brahmviharas: May all living beings be happy, may all beings be freed from their suffering, may all beings not be deprived of the good fortune they have attained. Those first three brahmviharas are wishes. But what are those wishes based on? The fact that all beings are the owners of their actions. So you wish that beings will behave in a way that will lead to happiness, that will not deprive them of their good fortune, that will get them out of suffering.

But then you're brought up short by looking at the way that people actually behave and you realize that how they behave isn't under your control. They have freedom of choice, just as you have freedom of choice. So in areas that are beyond your control—or that you could control, but you realize that it would pull you away from things that are more important—that's where you need to develop

equanimity, that that's just the way things are. Equanimity functions to keep your focus in the proper place, back on your actions.

Even more so with the second purpose of the reflection that all beings are the owners of their actions: The Buddha says you should think about that when you see other beings behave in different ways or see other beings in different levels of being, you have to realize you've been there before. You can very easily go back there again. No matter how good or how bad it is in any particular level of being, all beings are subject to their actions. So no matter how good it gets, beings are still creating kamma.

There's a passage in the Cannon where the Buddha talks about how long you can stay in different levels of being. If you get into the dimension of infinite space, I think it's 20,000 eons you stay there. The infinitude of consciousness is 40,000, and the dimension of nothingness is 60,000. That's a long time. But if you haven't gained any of the noble attainments, then when you fall from those places, you fall hard. You can go fall all the way down to hell, you can fall to be an animal, you can be a hungry ghost.

When you think about that, it gives rise to a sense of *samvega*. That's what gives rise to a desire to practice the path to find a way out. You think about all of the kamma that people are creating. Again, part of the reflection is that when you see them, you've been there before. And you could be there again. When you see a person who has passed away, you realize that this body is going to be subject to that same fate. Then where are you going to go after that? Maybe you just keep wandering around, wondering around. It's going to be a lot of the same old stuff, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, again and again. So you want to get out.

This is a good reflection. All too often, we say, well, the world's not so bad—when things look good. But then you look carefully, and things are not always good. You look at the history of the world: Things can get pretty horrible. And that's just the human realm. There are other realms where it's even worse. And even in the realms where it's better, you can't stay there forever.

Just think about going around, and around, and around. The Buddha said it's hard to find somebody who hasn't been your father, hasn't been your mother, hasn't been your son or daughter, brother or sister. Then you think about the nature of relationships within the family, and they're not always easy. How much longer do you want to go through all that? And even when they *are* good, they end. How much longer you want to go through that?

So to think back on Death Valley: We went through there a couple years back, and it didn't seem deadly at all. That's because there are ways of getting food in

there now, ways of getting water. There's a network to help. And it's the same here in Death World. We have the teachings. We have the Dhamma. We have communities of practitioners who enable us to feed our goodness, who encourage us to feed our goodness, give us recommendations, give us advice, give us encouragement.

So take advantage of that network. That way, at the very least as you leave Death World, your goodness will still survive. And that's a survival that really matters.