

Practice in Dying Well

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It's a common saying among the ajaans that when you're meditating, you're getting practice in how to die well. So, what are the skills you're going to need to die well? And how do you practice them while you're meditating?

Think of Buddha's image of a fire going from one house to another. As he said, just as fire requires something to hold on to—in this case, the wind—the mind requires something to hold on to as well, and it holds on to craving. Your craving is going to determine where you're going to go. Of course, if you don't hold on to craving at all, you don't have to go anywhere. But assuming you're not at that level yet, how do you get control of your craving, especially when the body is weak and your mental faculties may be impaired? This is what we're learning to do as we meditate: how to get a handle on craving, and how to compensate for weakness in the body and impairment in the mind.

Think of the formula for right mindfulness: remaining focused on one thing in and of itself—something that has nothing to do with sensuality—while putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

What's a good place to remain focused? Try the mind, in and of itself—awareness here in the present moment. You've got the breath as your anchor to make sure you stay in the present. Of course, at that point, there will come a time when you have to let go of the breath, which is why it is good to learn how to stay with the mind. In fact, when you're working with the breath, as Ajaan Lee points out, you're not focused solely on breath. You also have to keep one eye on the mind, to make sure it doesn't wander off and to make sure it feels at ease with the breath.

The Buddha taught about how the suffering that weighs the mind down is the unnecessary suffering we add to things. How are you going to know that? By watching the mind and seeing what you're doing that's weighing the mind down. So even though we're focused on the breath, we're here at the breath so that we can see our mind. Think of the breath as a mirror for the mind. It keeps you anchored in the present moment. If anything happens in the mind, it'll show up in the breath. Consider it a way to getting to know your mind better.

The other activity that you have to master is learning to put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That can get very strong, especially when you realize that you have got to leave this body: Where are you going to go?

Different worlds will appear to you, different identities that you could possibly take on. And in order to get used to saying, “No, no, no, I don’t want to go there,” you need to keep giving yourself good reasons for not going, in addition to mastering the skill of turning off any inclination to go there. The reasons will help because sometimes willpower gets weak. If you’ve clearly seen with your discernment the dangers of going to places like that, it’s a lot easier to avoid them.

Lots of people have mentioned to me that since the pandemic began, and they have lots more time to themselves, past events have loomed much larger in their minds. There’s not much gratification coming in to the present moment, so it’s easier for past events to come up. You suddenly find yourself wanting to go back and either enjoy something that you miss from the past or to redo something that you handled very poorly in the past. But you don’t want either of those things to be coming up at the moment of death.

There’s a verse from the Buddha: not hankering after the future, not hankering after the past, seeing what’s arising in the present moment and doing your duty right now. That’s presented as a way of leading an auspicious life, having an auspicious day. But it’s also the way to have an auspicious death. Because with regard to the past, there are so many memories in your mind about past things that are not there anymore. If you were to go back, you wouldn’t be able to find them.

I remember thinking about this when I was in India, visiting the different Buddhist holy spots. You see these people whose lives are right there. They’ve been born there, they live there, they probably are going to die there. Yet they’re no longer Buddhists and they’re not getting much out of those spots. In their previous lifetimes, they may have wanted to be reborn at those spots, out of faith. But now the spots have changed and conditions have changed. Society around the spots has changed. So, the memories that you recall, where you really liked this particular pleasure, this particular place: Watch out. Those pleasures are gone. Those places have changed. If thoughts like that come up, have to learn to say, “No, no, can’t go there.”

As for the situations that you want to go back to and handle in a different way, watch out for those too. Sometimes they involve getting back at somebody or just going back to the situation and trying to re-run it. You could find yourself trapped in all *kinds* of unfortunate circumstances if you followed those desires.

So, the skill to putting aside your distracting thoughts is an important skill in meditation. All too often, we try to get quickly past it, so that the mind can

settle down. But the more you learn about the process of distraction while you're meditating, through learning to overcome it, then the easier it will be not to be deflected when the time comes to leave this body.

So, these are the couple of skills you are going to need—and these are the skills we're working on right here.

When you're thinking about the role of mindfulness at death, it's also good to keep in mind Buddha's different analogies and similes for mindfulness. One of them is a man whose hair is on fire; his turban is on fire. He puts it out right away. He has to be mindful and relentless in doing that. In the same way, with any unskillful thoughts come up in the mind, you have to learn to say No right away, with the same sense of urgency, the same mindfulness and relentlessness. These thoughts may seem innocent now. You could spend the rest of the hour in some pleasant reveries. But suppose that those reveries were to take over your mind when your mind needs to be more alert and focused on what it is doing. You don't want that. So, learn to develop the good habit now.

There's also the image of the quail, wandering out of its territory. Make sure your mind stays within its territory, away from thoughts of sensuality.

Then there's the gatekeeper, knowing whom to let in, whom not to let in. A lot of thoughts can come up into the mind at the time of death. You need to be very careful about which ones you allow in. Have a clear sense of what's a safe territory and what's not. And have a strong sense of urgency, because we don't know when death will come. So, it's good to keep up the practice where you are right here, right now.

Fortunately, these skills that you develop as you meditate are good not only for when you're dying, but also good right here, right now as you keep on breathing. So, keep them in mind and practice them every day, every day, every day, so that they get firmly implanted in your mind. That way, at times when the body gets weak and you can't stay with the body anymore, you'll still have some good images, some good habits, that will see you through.