

## *Unhindered at Death*

*May 21, 2021*

When we usually think about the hindrances, we think about the Buddha's comment that before you get the mind established in its frame of reference, before you establish mindfulness properly, before you get into concentration, you've got to clear the hindrances out of the way. So we tend to think that the hindrances are mainly a problem with getting the mind into concentration. But they also hinder discernment.

And when you look at the Buddha's list of things that can go wrong as you're approaching death, the hindrances loom large as well. So when you are cleaning them out of the way right now, it's not just a matter of arranging for a nice meditation tonight. You're trying to get some skill in clearing them out of the way so that when the body gets weaker and weaker, and the end is near, these qualities won't take over the mind. At that moment, you'll need all your powers of concentration and discernment to see you through.

The big hindrance the Buddha talks about in this context, the one that always comes first, is not to be worried. In other words, don't give in to restlessness and anxiety. He lists different issues that a dying person might be worried about, but two of them have to do with two of the other hindrances. One is the fact that you're leaving the sensual pleasures you've known as a human being. As long as you're attached to thoughts of sensuality, you'll fear that you could go to some place where those pleasures no longer exist. This is one of the reasons why, when the Buddha is giving Mahanama some instructions on how to counsel somebody who is dying, after making sure that the person is not worried about his family, not worried about his work—or her family or her work—the next question is: Are you worried about leaving human sensuality?

It's interesting that the Buddha doesn't recommend that the person abandon thoughts of sensuality right away. He first has you tell the person that there is better sensuality up in the heavens. Set your mind there. Then he'll recommend you go up the ladder of the heavens, from one level to the next to the next, because the devas in some of those lower heavens are like the teenagers of the heavenly worlds. They're obsessed with sex and fast vehicles. When you get to the higher levels of the sensual heavens, the devas seem a little more clear-headed. As you get more clear-headed, then you can start talking about doing away with the attachment to self-identity.

So you can try the same technique with yourself as you meditate here. Prepare yourself. If you find yourself thinking about human sensuality, tell yourself, “I hear it’s better up in the heavens.” Then work your way up, ultimately realizing that no matter how good it gets up there, you’ll have to come crashing down again.

This is the contemplation of the graduated discourse or the step-by-step discourse—the *anupubbi-katha*. You do good, you’re generous and virtuous, you get rewarded, but then the rewards fall through and you have to start doing good again. The only escape from this pattern is to get out of the cycle entirely. To think in those terms is a perfectly legitimate way to think as you’re dying because, as the Buddha says, there have been cases where people gain awakening at the moment of death.

This is why taking rebirth as a working hypothesis is so important. Lots of people feel that when death comes, there’s nothing much you can do, so they just give up. From that point on, it’s like going down a slide. They don’t give any thought to making good choices—or making any choices at all. They just feel that events are taking over. You have to remind yourself that you *are* making choices all the way. So even as the body is getting weaker, you want the mind to be strong. One of the ways you strengthen it is to try to get past any fascination with sensuality. You admit that, yes, it may have its good side, but it also has its huge drawbacks. You have to keep those drawbacks firmly in mind.

Another reason why you might be anxious is if you have doubts about the Dhamma. Doubt or uncertainty is another hindrance. So here again you remember: How do you overcome doubt? You overcome doubt by observing what’s skillful and unskillful in the mind. What are you doing right now that’s skillful? Whichever thoughts coming through the mind are skillful, hold on to those. As for the unskillful ones, don’t let yourself wander off in their direction. See that this really does clear up the mind, and that will begin to allay some of your doubts. So when you’re working on getting past your doubts right now, you’re also working on one of the main reasons for worry and anxiety as death approaches.

As for the two remaining hindrances, one is ill will. The Buddha gives the example of a soldier. A professional soldier came to see him one time and told him what his teachers had told him as they were teaching him the skills of soldiering: that if you die in battle, you’re going to go to the heavens of the heroes. What did the Buddha have to say about that?

The Buddha, being the kind of person who didn’t want to tell people their occupation was wrong unless they were really serious about making an improvement, tried to avoid the question twice. But the soldier kept pressing him.

So the Buddha finally said that if you die in the midst of battle, it's likely that your mind state will have a lot of ill will: "May these beings be destroyed, may these beings meet with a bad end." If you die with a mind of ill will, you're going to go down.

Hearing this, the soldier started to weep. The Buddha said, "That's why I didn't want to answer your question." The soldier said, "I'm not weeping over your answer. I'm just weeping over how much I have been deceived by my teachers."

The point here being you don't want to die with ill will. This is why the Buddha said elsewhere that if you're being pinned down, and bandits are sawing off your limbs with a two-handed saw, you have to have goodwill for the bandits. You don't want to die with ill will for them, because a death directed by ill will doesn't lead to anything good; it leads you to a situation where that all you can think of is how you want revenge. That's not a good attitude with which to be reborn. It's surely not an attitude that would help you gain some clarity and see how you can get out of this mess entirely.

The other remaining hindrance is sloth and torpor. The Buddha once went to see a group of monks in a sick ward and said to them, "Approach death mindful and alert. That is our advice to you all." In other words, approach death with the opposite of sloth or torpor. Try to be clearly aware of one of the frame of references: body, feelings, mind, or mental qualities in and of themselves. Be alert to what you're doing. Maintain your focus on the present moment, because that is the spot where you're going to be making your choices. If you're just drifting off, drifting off, the choices are getting made for you in one of the subconscious areas of your mind

Now, the subconscious tends to follow old habits. It's the part of the mind that doesn't really look at itself. That's why it's subconscious. The way we try to get past that subconscious aspect is to learn to be quicker and quicker at seeing what we're doing and the choices we're making. As the Buddha says, even if you act on an intention that you're not alert to, the fact that it's there and is influencing your choices will still have karmic repercussions. So the more you can reflect on your actions, the more likely you'll be able to check yourself, to clean up the areas of the mind that have been subconscious in the past but now have been brought to the light of the day.

So the basic message here is that you want to face death unhindered—and that the work you do as you're meditating to get past the hindrances here and now will have an impact that lasts much longer than just this meditation session. You're developing skills that you'll need at all the important junctures in your life: the points where you're making decisions will have a long-term impact. You want to

make sure you're making those decisions from a mind state that's mindful, focused, and alert, motivated by goodwill and coming from a clear sense of what the true Dhamma has to teach, what the true Dhamma is. That's how you can learn to rely on yourself and be your own refuge.

This is another way in which that principle is true: that the Dhamma protects those who practice it. It helps where it's most needed when making choices, and when choices have a lasting influence, especially those made at the time of death. You want to be clear about what the best choices are and you want to develop a mind state that can see itself clearly, in action. The best way to do that is to get practice right now in clearing the hindrances out of your mind.