

Verified Confidence

July 31, 2021

One of the reasons that people fear death is because they're not sure of the true Dhamma. Now, a lot of people have never even heard of the true Dhamma. But still, they don't know what's going to happen after death: "Is there such a thing as a deathless element? Is death a wipeout? Can your actions have any influence on what happens after death?" If you're not sure about these things, death is a very frightening prospect. One moment you're here, and then: Who knows? That's the attitude.

The Buddha said that you overcome that fear when you actually do come to see the true Dhamma. That's when you gain what's called the Dhamma eye. It's expressed in the Canon as: "Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation." It's portrayed in the Canon in many places where people gain it having had no background in the Buddha's teachings except for one talk. So they haven't heard beforehand that that's what the Dhamma eye is supposed to be.

So, how would that phrase occur naturally to the mind? It would be through an experience of the deathless, something that is not subject to origination and is not subject to passing away. In seeing that, you basically step outside of time and space.

And stepping outside, you see how long time has been. Your experience of time didn't begin with the date you were born. It went way back through the past, and potentially it can go on for a long time into the future.

People who've gained the Dhamma eye know that there's a limit to how much further they're going to have to experience birth and death. And they realize that there is something that doesn't die. So they can face death with a lot more confidence. The only fear they might have about death would be about the pain around death. But in a phrase repeated in the Canon, they have no fear of what happens after death. That's the fear you overcome.

But to practice for the sake of overcoming that fear, you have to accept certain things. This is where verified confidence in the Dhamma, which is knowledge of the true Dhamma, differs from taking refuge in the Dhamma. In taking refuge, you're still not sure. There's still going to be some doubt, especially in the beginning. But you see that the Dhamma makes sense—particularly the Dhamma of karma and rebirth, beginning with the principle that your actions really do exist.

There were people in the time of the Buddha who said that actions didn't exist at all. The only things that really existed were unchanging elements. Everything else was an illusion. The Buddha, though, said No. Actions really

exist. They're shaped by your intentions and they're going to give results in line with those intentions. Those results can happen either in this lifetime or in future lifetimes, but the possibilities of future lifetimes are shaped by our actions now. Now, the Buddha didn't say he could prove that to anybody ahead of time. At least he couldn't give an empirical proof. But he did give pragmatic proofs.

One is that if you accept this teaching, you're much more likely to behave in skillful ways. You can reflect on your behavior, and there'll be a sense of well-being that goes with that reflection because you can see that you haven't harmed anybody.

A second pragmatic proof is that it doesn't make any sense to cut yourself off from possibilities. If you were to believe that your actions didn't have any consequences, then you wouldn't be able to accomplish anything with your actions. You'd just be waving your hands around in empty space. Whereas if you believe that your actions do have consequences and that it is possible through your actions to put an end to suffering, that opens possibilities that you would otherwise close off. Why close them off when you're not one hundred percent sure?

So those are the pragmatic proofs. It's up to us to decide whether they're convincing and worth taking on as working hypotheses, because that's what conviction is in the beginning: assuming working hypotheses. You say, "Well, let's give it a try." And the Buddha says that that attitude is perfectly fine. In fact, he even has a version of what's known in the West as the Pascal's wager. If there is such a thing as a future lifetime and it is determined by your actions, then you will be prepared for it. If there's not, then at the very least you can hold yourself honorable in your behavior now, because the principles that the Buddha said give rise to happiness are harmless and noble.

The roots of unskillful action are greed, aversion, and delusion. One of the ways you overcome uncertainty about the Dhamma is to look in your mind to see that when you act on greed, anger, or delusion, what are the results? When you act on their opposite, what are the results? This is where you have to be honest and very observant to see which actions are connected to which results.

The Buddha gives an interesting test case. He says to develop the brahmaviharas. First look at your actions. Straighten out your actions: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no harsh speech, no divisive speech, no idle chatter, no inappropriate greed, no ill will. Hold right views about action. Straighten out those actions. Cleanse the mind, the Buddha said, because it's through these kind of actions that you're cleansed.

Then develop the brahmaviharas: goodwill for all beings, compassion for all beings, empathetic joy for all, equanimity for all. Don't do it as an idle pastime. Make it part of your genuine motivation: that these attitudes will govern your

actions. When you act on these principles, the Buddha said, again, even if there were no rebirth and your karma didn't have any consequences beyond this lifetime, still you could look at yourself and see you were pure in your intentions. A great sense of well-being would come with that.

That's the test case, but it's not the total case. A couple of years back there was a movement to rewrite the Canon to say that the brahmaviharas were a complete practice. But as the Buddha himself said in many places in the Canon, the practice of the brahmaviharas, even though it leads to high levels of rebirth, doesn't lead to dispassion unless you really look at the state of the mind that results from those brahmaviharas.

After all, you can use the brahmaviharas to get the mind into good, strong concentration. There's one passage where the Buddha says you can get into the first jhana with the first brahmavihara, the second with the second, the third with the third, the fourth with the fourth. But there's another where he says you can use the concentration based on the brahmaviharas and analyze it in terms of the factors for awakening. You see that that state of the mind as something fabricated.

And, as we all know, once you start thinking in terms of fabrication—that's the way you breathe, that's the way you think, talk to yourself, the perceptions you hold in mind, the feelings you hold, focus on; these things fabricate your sense of the body, they fabricate your words, they fabricate the mind: When you begin to see what you're fabricating, you come to realize that your experience is not just given to you. You're out there actively shaping it.

The fact that it's shaped means there's going to be some stress. No matter how well you shape the experience, it's going to be stressful.

You begin to realize that this applies to everything in the six senses. No matter how good a sensory experience may be, there's going to be stress, because it has to be fabricated in order to make sense, in order to be an experience.

Reflecting on this, you can also reflect that you've heard there's a deathless—and it begins to seem attractive.

That's one way of inducing dispassion based on the brahmaviharas. But in all cases, to get to that state where you have confirmed your conviction, it's going to require dispassion.

The Buddha made a comparison. He said it's like hunting an elephant. The elephant hunter wants a big bull elephant because he's got heavy work that needs to be done. He goes into the forest and sees big footprints. But because he's an experienced hunter, he realizes that these may not be the footprints of a bull elephant, because there are dwarf females with big feet. The footprints might be theirs. But they look promising, so he follows on. He sees scratch marks up in the trees. Now, these could be the scratch marks caused by the

tusks of the bull-elephant, but they could also be caused by the tusks of skinny, tall females who couldn't be able to do the work. But still the marks look promising, so he moves on. Finally he sees the bull elephant in a forest clearing. That's when he knows he's got his bull elephant.

In the same way, the Buddha said, the footprints stand for gaining concentration, which would be, in this case, through the brahmaviharas. The scratch marks would be the psychic powers that come from concentration. Even that's not a proof that the Buddha knew what he was talking about. It still doesn't confirm your conviction in the Buddha as being truly awakened. But it looks promising, so you keep on practicing. You finally get to the point where you have that experience of the deathless. That's when you see your bull elephant. That's when you know.

The problem for us—and this is where the analogy breaks down—is that the elephant hunter has seen elephants before. He knows all the kinds of elephants there are, knows that there is such a thing as a bull elephant. For us, in the very beginning, we're not sure. The Buddha's teaching us something we've never seen: the deathless.

So this is why we have to take refuge first, take the working hypotheses first, make wagers first. That's the way it is in the world when there's no certainty. Look at the world as a whole. Everybody out there is wagering on a particular belief about action in one way or another: what kind of results you can get from actions and how far those results go. It's a lot of guess work, and a lot of people are making a lot of unhealthy, unwise wagers. So here's the Buddha offering you something that he says is a wise wager. However things turn out, you turn out well. And if it turns out that what he promised really is true, then the wager is more than repaid.

So, the Buddha doesn't demand one hundred percent allegiance right from the start. He doesn't ask if you swear up and down that you take him as your personal lord and saviour. He realizes you're making a gamble. But he's confident in his own experience, and he's confident in the experience of the many students who followed him, that this actually does work. The gamble, if you sincerely pursue it, will pay off.

So, when your practice doesn't seem to be going anywhere, think about the Buddha's recommendations. Work on the brahmaviharas. Get very clear about what is skillful and unskillful in your mind, so that you have some confirmation inside. That'll give more strength to your conviction. It'll help keep you on the path to the point where that conviction becomes verified confidence. It's at that point that there's no more fear of death.

So, do what you can to see if that promise is true.