

Fear of Death

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A brahman came to see the Buddha one time and said to him, “There’s nobody who’s not afraid of death.”

The Buddha said, “There are those who are afraid of death and those who are not.” He listed four reasons why people might be afraid of death.

The first is that you’re afraid that you’re going to leave your body and you’re fearful about what that would mean, not having a body. The second is you’re afraid you’re going to be leaving the sensual pleasures of the human realm, for fear that you would be deprived of pleasure. The third is that you know that you’ve done unskillful things in the past—you may have been cruel, you may have simply not helped people when you could have—and you fear that there may be punishment for that. The fourth is that you haven’t seen the true Dhamma. In other words, you don’t know what’s followed by death. Annihilation? Rebirth? It’s a big, big question mark.

Those are the common reasons why people are afraid of death. The training we get is designed to get us past those reasons for being afraid.

The Buddha actually points out there’s another, more valid reason to be afraid of death, which is that we can be led on by our cravings at the moment of death. On the surface that doesn’t sound so bad: If you crave something, that means you’d like to go there. You think you wouldn’t crave anything bad. But that idea really is ignorant of the nature of craving. Craving tends to be pretty blind. You may want something but you don’t think about the consequences of wanting it. Random cravings can come up in the mind, especially at the moment of death when the body’s very weak. You suddenly remember somebody who wronged you horribly in the past and a desire for revenge might appear just at that moment.

There’s a story they tell about how King Asoka—who at the moment his death was really displeased with his treasurer—ended up getting reborn as a snake next to the treasury. That’s a real thing to fear: where your cravings might lead you.

The training we get is designed to get past that craving, that cause of fear. Think of the triple training: training in heightened virtue, heightened concentration—trying to heighten mind, which is the phrase in the Pali, and basically means getting the mind to a good strong concentration—and then heightened discernment.

For instance, to counteract the fear of leaving the body, we practice concentration. One of the topics of concentration is contemplation of the body,

as we chanted just now. What is there in the body that's of any real essence? We reflect in this way to think of the drawbacks of the body. Through concentration it's also good to have some experience with being aware of a state that's formless. Otherwise, when you think about the drawbacks of the body, you might say, "Even with those drawbacks, how can I function without a body? How could I exist without a body? I'll put up with whatever the drawbacks are." But when you practice concentration and get the mind into the formless states—such as the infinitude of space or the infinitude of consciousness—you realize that your awareness can still exist without having anything to do with the body at all. These are very spacious states—wide open. That inclines the mind to realize that maybe your awareness could exist without body, and it would actually be a good thing.

As for the fear that you'll be missing out on human sensuality, here again, you need an alternative pleasure. In this case, it would be the pleasure of any of the jhanas. Get the mind focused on the breath, and the pleasure that can come from that doesn't count as a sensual pleasure. You can get the breath really, really comfortable, and there can be a strong sense of well-being. With that, you're less inclined to be concerned about missing sensual pleasures in the human realm, because you've got something better: a non-sensual pleasure that has no drawbacks. Sensual pleasures blind you. Notice that the Buddha's images for sensuality make clear that you're put in a position of danger, you're put in a position of debt. When your happiness depends on sensual pleasures, there's danger, because there are people who want what you've got. The more sensual pleasures you're able to pile up, the more people will be jealous of what you've got and want to take it.

As for the image of debt, if you owe your pleasure to somebody else, they can take it away at any time. So you're in a position of weakness. But if it's a pleasure that comes from concentration, that's yours. You're inhabiting your sense of the body as you feel it from within. Nobody's going to come and move in, trying to inhabit the same place. So this is your territory. There's no debt; there's no danger. The little bit of danger is that you'd be stuck on this pleasure, not wanting to go for the higher pleasures of noble attainments. But this is a much safer pleasure than the pleasure that comes from sensuality. So work on this.

As for fear of what punishments might be awaiting you, as the Buddha said that if you realize you've been making mistakes, the best course is to resolve that you will not repeat those mistakes. You take the precepts and develop thoughts of goodwill, for yourself, for the people you've wronged, for everybody. That can change your course. One of the Buddha's insights into the workings of karma is that it's not the case that everybody who does something wrong in this lifetime is

going to have to be punished in the next lifetime. If you come to your senses and gain right view and hold the right view all the way to the end, that can save you from a lot of grief—because right view entails that you would follow the precepts in line with the triple training.

Then training in virtue, training in concentration, and training in discernment are required to deal with that last fear, the fear that comes from not having seen the true Dhamma. If you went up to somebody in the street and ask “Are you afraid of death because you haven’t seen the true Dhamma?” they wouldn’t know what you’re talking about. But if you did ask them “Do you know what’s going to happen after death?” unless someone has gained the Dhamma eye, they really don’t know. There may be people who say, “Well, I believe so and so is going to save me” or “I believe this particular belief,” but it’s just a belief. Real knowledge doesn’t come until you’ve seen the deathless. Then you *know* that death is not the end. You don’t just believe it. In the course of seeing the deathless, you step out of time, and in stepping out of time, you may not see the details of your previous lifetimes, but you do see that you’ve spent a long, long time, going through the many, many lifetimes of the past.

That’s how you get past those four fears: by a full training in the triple training. Ideally, you should give you some grounding to get past that fifth fear—the fear that you really should be afraid of—which concerns what’s going to happen to your cravings at the moment of death. Where they’re going to take you.

If you’ve had training in virtue, you’ve learned how to say No to your cravings. You’ve learned some restraint. The same with concentration: You’ve learned that there are good pleasures that can come simply by sitting there breathing, inhabiting the body as you feel it from within. You’ve learned to pry yourself loose from sensual cravings that pull you by a string

Then if you develop discernment, you can get past even craving for becoming and craving for non-becoming.

Otherwise, there’s a passage we chant often which says we’re a slave to craving. Think about that passage in the Canon. Ratthapala is talking to King Korayva and he goes over facts of aging, illness, death, while the King reflects on those things. But then Ratthapala asks the king, “If someone reliable were to come from the east and say that there’s a wealthy but weak kingdom to the east that you could conquer, would you go for it?” The King is 80 years old, he’s practically dying. He knows he can’t take anything with him. Yet, he says “Yes, I’d go for it. Why not?” “How about a kingdom to the south?” “Sure.” “A kingdom to the west... a kingdom to the north... a kingdom on the other side of the ocean?” “I’d conquer that, too.”

This is the part of the mind that really is scary. Even with reflection and everything, you can still just fall into a state of craving. It's like the wind that blows fires around. It can go in any direction. That's what we really should be afraid of: that we haven't gotten our cravings under control.

So that's where we work again on the triple training. Work with your virtue, work with your concentration, and particularly work with your discernment, so that when a craving comes up, you can ask yourself, "Is this something you really want to go with?" Ordinarily, as the Buddha said, we take craving as our friend. Whatever it says, it's one of those friends we believe implicitly. Whatever it says is true and we go along with it. So one of the most important parts of the practice is learning how to step back from your cravings because you really want to realize that these "friends" are the cause of suffering.

This is where it's good to contemplate those four noble truths again and again and again, to see in action, when craving comes up, that there's going to be stress in the mind. To reflect on your cravings in the past to ask yourself how much you can really trust them. When you've worked on this, that's when you've worked on the real issue. Ask yourself, what are the things that can influence your craving to go in a wrong direction? They come down to the five hindrances: sensuality, ill will, sloth and torpor—you get sleepy and you don't really know where your cravings are going, you just fall in with them. This is why the Buddha said that the important thing about preparing for death is that you learn how to be mindful and alert. Even in the face of pain, even in the face of losing your body, you've got to maintain your mindfulness. You've got to maintain your alertness.

And you can't let yourself worry at that point. That's the other big issue the texts emphasize again and again: Don't be worried at the point of death. And try to get to that stage in the practice where you have no more uncertainty about what the Buddha taught. You've seen for yourself there as a deathless.

That's where you have no more fear about death as related to what's going to happen in the next lifetime. You may still have some fear about the pains you're going to have to face leading up to death. But that's really minor when you can be sure that after death you're not going to fall.

So the way to get past your fear of death, and to really prepare for the real dangers, is nothing mysterious. It's what the Buddha taught again and again and again: virtue concentration, discernment; virtue, concentration, discernment. Just have a strong sense that this is the Dhamma you can take as your refuge.

You don't need anything else aside from this. This is your protection against those fears, your protection against the dangers that otherwise await. So do your best to cultivate these three trainings, because they really provide safety.