Unhindered at Death

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When you meditate, you're getting practice in how to die well: This is a common theme in the teachings of the Thai Forest masters, and it's thoroughly in line with what the Buddha taught. He once went to visit monks in a sick ward and told them to approach the time of death mindful and alert (SN 36:7). Alertness he defined as being aware of your actions while doing them. Mindfulness he defined as practicing the four establishings of mindfulness—focused on body, feelings, mind, or mental qualities in and of themselves—which were his instructions in how to get the mind into right concentration.

The reason you need to be mindful and alert at the time of death is because you'll be making many choices then, choices that will determine if and where you'll be reborn, all while events are happening in a rush. The image the Buddha gave in SN 44:9 was of a fire leaping from one house to the next. In terms of the physics of his day, fire had to cling to some form of sustenance in order to continue burning. As it left one house and set fire to a neighboring one, the fire was said to cling to the sustenance provided by the wind in between the houses. In the same way, when a being—defined as bundles of attachments—leaves this body and goes to another, it's sustained by the cravings to which it clings.

The image gives a good idea of why it's necessary to be mindful and alert in the midst of that conflagration. Craving devoid of mindfulness and alertness is blind. It rushes at things without thinking of the consequences, and so can drag you anywhere—to places of great pleasure or great anguish—just as a fire goes in whichever direction the wind blows. If you're forgetful and oblivious, then craving—even though you might think it would take you only where you'd really want to go—can easily get distracted by errant obsessions that lead you astray. For many people, dying is like turning on the computer to buy something useful, only to find themselves falling through a wormhole to an undesirable universe, lured in by a news item that sparked their lust or their ire.

This is precisely where meditation gives you practice in dying well, in that it trains you in how to overcome distraction, and in particular the five distractions that the texts identify as enemies of mindfulness and concentration, called the five hindrances: sensual desire, ill will, sloth & drowsiness, restlessness & anxiety, and doubt.

Sensual desire is any desire focused on attractive objects of the five senses, along with a fascination in fantasizing about the sensual pleasures they offer.

Ill will is the desire to see other beings suffer or get their just desserts.

Sloth & drowsiness is laziness and sleepiness in all their forms.

Restlessness & anxiety is remorse over past actions along with fear of future dangers.

Doubt covers any uncertainty as to whether there really is a path of action that can lead to true happiness, or—if there is—whether you're capable of following it.

The Canon describes these hindrances as mental states that corrupt the mind and weaken discernment. They're usually mentioned in the context of concentration practice: You need to abandon them, at least temporarily, if you want to get the mind centered. But they play another role as well. When the Canon details the mental states that have to be cleared out of the mind at the approach of death, even though it doesn't mention the hindrances as a list, it does mention them individually. This means that when you try to meditate but are overcome by the hindrances, you're not only having a bad meditation session. You're setting yourself up for a bad death. But if you *can* rid the mind of hindrances, you're solidifying your concentration now, while at the same time getting one step closer to mastering the currents of the mind that will flow out when the body is no longer a place where you can stay.

The Buddha's instructions for dealing with the hindrances at the approach of death make most sense when viewed in the context of his teaching about how those currents of the mind influence death and rebirth. This teaching, in turn, is based on his explanation of kamma and rebirth: that skillful actions tend to lead to good results in this life and the next, while unskillful actions tend to lead to bad results in this life and the next. This means that **doubt** around accepting the truth of these teachings is the first hindrance you have to deal with.

AN 4:184 lists doubt about the True Dhamma as one of the major causes for fear and terror at the time of death. Now, there are many people who've never even heard of the True Dhamma, but even they will fear death if they're unsure about what will happen at death and if they have no firm basis for knowing that their actions can have a positive impact on what they'll experience before, during, and after their dying moment.

The only true cure for this type of doubt is to have practiced the Dhamma to the point of attaining the first level of awakening, called the arising of the Dhamma eye. That's when your conviction in the Dhamma has genuinely been confirmed: There is a dimension of experience that isn't touched by death, and it can be attained through human efforts. But to practice to gain the Dhamma eye, you first have to have accepted the Buddha's teachings on kamma and rebirth as working hypotheses on which you base your practice.

When trying to persuade his listeners to take on these hypotheses, the Buddha was very clear on the fact that he couldn't provide any empirical proof for them, but he did offer pragmatic proofs. One is that you're more likely to behave skillfully if you accept the fact that skillful actions give positive results. Another is that these teachings open the possibility for higher attainments—such as the deathless—based on skillful actions, which would be closed off if you didn't accept them.

He also presented these hypotheses as wise wagers: If there is rebirth, and if it is influenced by your actions, you will have kept yourself safe if you've acted on these teachings. If there is no rebirth, or if there is rebirth but it's not affected by your actions, you will at least have behaved honorably in a way that frees you from fear, hostility, and ill will in the present life.

To strengthen your conviction that his teachings on skillful action are true, the Buddha advised that you carefully observe skillful and unskillful mental states as they arise in the mind and influence your actions, noting the results that come from acting on them. In particular, he recommended developing thoughts of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity—the four *brahma-vihāras*—to observe how they have a good impact on your actions and on your life as a whole. As we will see below, the Buddha also recommended these four brahma-vihāras as antidotes to two other hindrances: anxiety over your past mistreatment of others, and any ill will you might have toward people who have been or are mistreating you.

When you've followed these instructions heedfully, the Buddha notes that there's no reason to fear what will happen after death (AN 4:116). This doesn't totally overcome doubt about the True Dhamma, but it can give a measure of reassurance. If you pursue the brahma-vihāras to the point of giving rise to strong concentration, that concentration can then become the basis for the development of insight leading to dispassion—and dispassion is what can lead to the arising of the Dhamma eye. That will put an end to doubt about the True Dhamma once and for all.

Drowsiness is another hindrance that has to be dealt with before dealing with the others. If you're falling asleep, there's no way you can recognize the other hindrances as they arise, nor can you do anything to counteract them. Strangely, this is the one hindrance not explicitly mentioned in the Canon as a potential obstacle at death. But because drowsiness is the main obstacle to mindfulness and alertness, there seems to be every reason to regard it as an implicit obstacle to the very skills that the Buddha told the monks in the sick ward to cultivate.

As he explained mindfulness to them, they should give particular attention to mindfulness of feelings, at the same time cultivating three other mental states that are the opposite of sloth & drowsiness: being heedful, ardent, and resolute. They should then use these mental qualities to examine how pleasure, pain, and neutral feelings of neither pleasure nor pain arise dependent on conditions.

In MN 118, where the Buddha explains feelings as a frame of reference for mindfulness practice in the context of breath meditation, he describes four stages in the examination. The first two involve learning to give rise (1) to a sense of refreshment and (2) to feelings of pleasure as you breathe in and out. These two steps obviously refer to cultivating pleasant feelings in dependence on the body through the practice of right concentration. It is possible, even when you're ill, to find some parts of the body that are not in pain, and to cultivate the potential for pleasant feelings in those parts. These feelings provide you with a solid sense of

grounding as you encounter any pains that may arise elsewhere in the body at the approach of death. The third step involves becoming sensitive to how perceptions interact with feelings to shape the state of your mind, and the fourth step involves developing perceptions and feelings that will have a calming effect on the mind.

In his instructions to the monks in the sick ward, he provides some detail in this last step: See any feelings that arise as separate from but dependent on the body; realize that both body and feelings are inconstant; and, as a result, develop dispassion for them. It's in this way that the mind can be freed from any obsessions around feelings of any sort—particularly the pains that can accompany the dissolution of the body—so that the mind can experience them disjoined from them. In other words, it experiences them clearly, but with a sense of being separate from them. They make no inroads on the mind. When the mind is disjoined from feelings, craving has nowhere to gain a foothold.

These instructions are obviously aimed at approaching death with the greatest skill, so that you won't be subject to rebirth at all. And they obviously assume that the mind is free from sloth & drowsiness so that it can observe clearly what's going on inside it. This is why it's good to master ahead of time the Buddha's techniques for dealing with drowsiness. His primary recommendation, if you find that you're getting sleepy as you meditate, is to change your meditation theme to one that's more rousing. If gentle breathing is putting you to sleep, breathe more forcefully. Or change your meditation topic altogether to one that involves more active thinking, such as the contemplation of the parts of the body, to develop some dispassion toward it—and toward the idea of taking on a new body after death.

It's also good to gain experience in dealing skillfully with pain so that you can learn to see the body, the pain, and the awareness of the body and pain as three separate but interrelated things. Many of the Forest ajaans recommend questioning your perceptions around the pain—this would fall in line with the third and fourth steps in the breath meditation instructions given above—to see which perceptions create a connection between the mind and feelings, and which perceptions allow you to see how separate body, feelings, and mind actually are.

When you can separate pain from the mind in this way, you'll have less of a need for narcotic painkillers as death approaches, and you'll be in a better position to approach death mindful and alert.

As for the remaining hindrances, two—restlessness & anxiety and ill will—are treated as out-and-out obstacles. Sensual desire, though, is treated in a more complex fashion, both as an obstacle but also as a lure for overcoming other obstacles.

Of all the hindrances discussed in relationship to imminent death, **restlessness & anxiety** seems to be the Buddha's primary focus. In his various instructions for how to give advice to a person who's dying, this is the hindrance

he always treats first. This may be because the dying person is assumed already to have at least some conviction in the Dhamma. Or it may be that, no matter what one's beliefs, this hindrance can cause the most anguish both prior to and after death.

When the Buddha visits individual monks who are sick, his first question—after asking after their physical comfort—is to ask if they have any anxiety, anguish, or remorse (SN 35:74–75). When Nakulamātar, one of the Buddha's closest disciples, comforts her husband, who is severely ill (AN 6:16), she starts by saying, "Don't be worried as you die, householder. Death is painful for one who is worried. The Blessed One has criticized being worried at the time of death." When the Buddha gives advice to his cousin, Mahānāma, on how to counsel a dying person (SN 55:54), he tells him first to comfort the person as to his/her virtue, and then to ask if the person has any worries.

The suttas list a wide range of things that people might be worried about at the time of death. Nakulamātar focuses on her husband's potential worries about her: that she won't be able to support herself and the family, that she will take another husband, and that she will fall away from the Dhamma. In every case, she assures him that his worries are unfounded. She's skilled at carding wool and spinning cotton, so she can easily support herself and their children; she will remain faithful to him even after his death just as she has been faithful throughout their life together; and she will feel an even greater desire to see the Buddha after he, her husband, is gone. As it turns out, her husband doesn't die, and he goes, leaning on a stick, to see the Buddha, who tells him, "It's your gain, your great gain, householder, that you have Nakulamātar—sympathetic & wishing for your welfare—as your counselor and instructor."

As for Mahānāma, he's also told to focus on any worries that a dying person might have about his/her family, but in this case he's told to tell the person that the time when worry might be potentially helpful has past: "You, my dear friend, are subject to death. If you feel concern for your spouse and children, you're still going to die. If you don't feel concern for your spouse and children, you're still going to die. It would be good if you abandoned concern for your spouse and children." Instead, the dying person should focus on the business at hand: trying to face the challenges of death mindful and alert.

Other potential worries at the time of death are those focused more on what will happen after death. The monks visited by the Buddha are worried that they will die without having attained a noble attainment that could guarantee the safety of their future course. He teaches them to regard all possible objects of craving and clinging as not-self, and as a result, they reach one or another of the levels of awakening.

On a more mundane level, there are also worries around potential kammic punishments for past unskillful actions—which have a way of looming large in the mind as death approaches. The Buddha advises, in cases like that, that you recognize that no amount of remorse can go back and undo a past misdeed. Instead, you should recognize it as a mistake, not to be repeated, and then develop thoughts of unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and

equanimity for all beings (SN 42:8). This practice accomplishes several things at once. By taking this expanded framework, you help to keep the mind from obsessing about the past deed, and to see it in the context of all the deeds, skillful and unskillful, committed by beings throughout the universe in their quest for happiness. By developing goodwill for all other beings as well as for yourself, you strengthen your intention never to repeat your past mistakes. This helps to keep the mind from heading down a downward slope.

Universal goodwill is also recommended for counteracting **ill will** at the time of death. A soldier once visited the Buddha, telling him that his teachers in the military arts had told him that if he died in battle, he would go to the heaven reserved for those slain in battle: Was that true? The Buddha, in line with the etiquette of the time, tried to avoid answering the question, but the soldier pressed him three times, so the Buddha finally answered: If a soldier dies in battle while harboring the thought, "May these beings be struck down or slaughtered or annihilated or destroyed. May they not exist," he will fall into the hell of those slain in battle. If he holds to the wrong view that he's destined for heaven from dying in battle, there are two possible rebirths for one of wrong view: hell or the animal womb (SN 42:3).

The antidote: goodwill for all, no matter how badly anyone has treated you. In MN 21, the Buddha gives an extreme example: You're being pinned down by bandits who have overpowered you and are cutting you savagely into pieces with a two-handled saw. Even in that case, the Buddha said, you should try to develop thoughts of goodwill, beginning with the bandits and then extending out to the entire cosmos. You don't want to be reborn with thoughts of revenge, for that would get you involved in a kammic back and forth that could pull you nowhere but down. Goodwill, in this case, might not be able to undo the pain of a violent death, but it would liberate you from an enormous amount of suffering on into the future.

Throughout the Canon, the Buddha treats the last remaining hindrance, **sensual desire,** as a major obstacle to getting and staying on the path. This type of desire also accounts for two of the major reasons for fearing death: attachment to sensual pleasures and attachment to the body. This is why the Canon contains so many passages dealing with the drawbacks of sensuality: A desire for sensual pleasures forces people to work hard to gain wealth, and even when their efforts succeed—which is by no means a sure thing—they suffer in trying to protect their wealth from thieves and hateful heirs. Sensuality also leads to conflicts, ranging from family spats to total war (MN 14). MN 53 provides a long list of images to illustrate the futility and dangers of sensuality. Among them: It's like a bead of honey on the blade of a knife, like borrowed goods that the owners can take back at any time, and like a dog gnawing on a bone that provides no nourishment at all. As Ajaan Lee explains this image, the dog gets nothing but the taste of its own saliva.

The Canon also contains many passages dealing with the drawbacks of having a body: When you look at its individual parts, for instance, you can't find anything that's clean. The fact that you have a body leaves you open to all sorts of illnesses (AN 10:60). These contemplations help to keep you from resenting whichever parts of your own body have subjected you to illness—it's the nature of all bodies and all body parts to be prone to illness—and to prevent you from aspiring to taking on another body after death in hopes of continuing to enjoy the sensual pleasures to which having that body would give you access.

Given the general tenor of the Buddha's teachings on sensuality, it's somewhat ironic, then, that he also sees a use for sensual desire at the approach of death. He instructs Mahānāma that, after he has cleared away any worries in the mind of the dying person, he should ask the person if he/she is worried about leaving human sensual pleasures behind. If the answer is yes, he should tell the person that heavenly sensual pleasures are even more splendid and refined than human pleasures: One should set one's mind on those. These instructions begin with the lowest level of the sensual heavens, and then keep advising the dying person to aim at progressively higher levels of heaven, where the pleasures grow progressively more splendid and refined, until he at last has the person aim at the highest heavens, the Brahmā worlds.

If Mahānāma can get the person this far, he should then tell the person, "Friend, even the Brahmā world is inconstant, impermanent, included in self-identity. It would be good if, having raised your mind above the Brahmā world, you brought it to the cessation of self-identity." If the person can follow these instructions, then, the Buddha says, "There is no difference—in terms of release—between the release of that lay follower whose mind is released and the release of a monk whose mind is released." In other words, it is possible for the person to reach full awakening at death.

This, of course, assumes that the person has already had some background in training the mind. This is a point that has to be kept in mind with regard to all of these hindrances: It's best not to wait until the moment of death to try to master the skills that will be needed at that time. The Buddha's teachings on causality show that every moment is a combination of influences from past actions—these provide the field of possibilities available at that moment—and from one's present actions: These determine which of those possibilities will get developed. This is true of every moment in life, and also at the moment of death.

This is why mindfulness of death is one of the standard topics of reflection. You recollect that death could come at any moment, so you focus right here and now on developing the mental skills that will be helpful at that time. That way, whenever death comes, you'll have good influences coming from the past and a set of skills that you can depend on in the present moment, so that at the very least you can direct your cravings to a good rebirth, and at best you can abandon craving altogether.

It's important to note that mindfulness of death does not take death as its primary focus. You don't focus your thoughts on death, death, death. Instead, you simply keep an awareness of death in the back of your mind so that you can

focus on the work that really needs to be done: cleansing the mind, in the present moment, of any of the hindrances that could create obstacles when death comes.

The question sometimes arises: Because the purpose of recollecting death is to focus attention on cleansing the mind here and now, and because the practice of concentration shares the same focus anyhow, why drag death into the picture? Can't we get the same results simply by focusing on the present moment? The answer is that recollection of death brings a helpful sense of urgency to what you're doing right here. A meditation session that may seem perfectly fine when it allows you to enjoy the present moment will seem woefully inadequate when you think of how well it's preparing you to die. It's like the difference between learning a foreign language just for the fun of it, and learning the same language when you know that you could, at any time, be deported to a country where that's the only language spoken, and you'd have to depend on it for your survival.

In the same way, when you keep death in the back of your mind, you'll be less likely to content yourself with pleasure in the here and now, and instead will do what you can to overcome the hindrances even in their subtlest forms, so that when the moment of death becomes here and now, you'll be thoroughly prepared.