Fear of Death

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One of the themes that gets you over and over again as you read the Buddhist teachings is a very strong sense of the dangers of life. We’re surrounded by aging, illness, and death. And as one of our standard chants says, these things are unavoidable. Once you’re born, these things are going to happen. Sooner or later, to a greater or lesser extent. So the question is, what do you do in the midst of these dangers? Because a lot of the dangers, on top of those basic dangers, are other dangers that we create for ourselves through our own carelessness, through our own greed, anger, and delusion. Oftentimes, it’s because of our fears of the basic dangers of aging, illness, and death that we get greedy, we get angry, we get deluded, grasping for things, trying to find some sense of security, or if not any security, at least some sense of immediate gratification, before things all start falling apart. Most people react to the larger dangers of life just by turning a blind eye to them. In our own society, we’ve done a pretty good job of keeping old people and sick people and dead people off the streets so you don’t see them. And as the old saying goes, “Out of sight, out of mind.” But these dangers keep coming back, no matter how much we try to avoid them. We try to banish them from our consciousness. And sometimes they come back with great force very suddenly, and the general reaction is shock. But then the question is, what is there to be shocked about? These things have always been there. They’re all around. So people go through a period of shock, and then they try to forget what has happened. And then they get caught up in complacent all over again, and then they get greedy and angry and deluded. So we try to get out of that cycle through the meditation, on the one hand, being very conscious of the dangers that face us, and at the same time developing the strength of mind so that we’re not overcome by those dangers. As the Buddha once said to King Pasenadikosa, “Suppose that there were a messenger coming from the East saying there’s an enormous mountain moving in from the East, crushing all living beings in its path. And another messenger were to come from the West, another from the North, another from the South. And they all had the same message. There were these mountains moving in, inexorably crushing everything in their path.” And the Buddha said, “Given the fact that human life is so hard to come by, what would you do?” And the king said, “Well, what else can I do? Just calm my mind and do as much good as I can.” So it’s that skill in learning how to calm your mind so you can do as much good as you can with the time allotted to you. That’s a lot of what the practice is all about. Buddhism uses the teaching on mindfulness of death and all the other dangers around us, not to make us depressed, but to spur us on to training the mind so that when these things do inevitably come, when the mind is well-trained, it’s not touched by them. That’s basically the good news of the Buddhist teachings. There is an aspect of the mind that is not touched by aging, illness, and death. It can’t be touched by anything at all, because it lies outside of space, outside of time. And it can be found through the practice. So we reflect on aging, illness, and death, like the chant we have almost every morning. “I am subject to aging, illness, and death. These things are unavoidable. I will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me.” These reflections are there to spur you on, to remind you that there’s no time to waste, because we have no idea when these things are going to happen. But we have the opportunity right now to practice, to develop those qualities of mind that will take us beyond fear, beyond the dangers. There’s a passage where the Buddha talks about the four qualities of mind that are needed so that you’re not afraid of death. These are all qualities that can be developed. The first one is to overcome passion and desire for your body, to overcome attachment to your own body. This is why we have the reflection on the thirty-two parts of the body. And it’s a common meditation. The John Furing students, those who tended to have visions, would get visions of their own body, so he’d have them take them apart into the thirty-two parts, or else he’d have them imagine ten years from now, twenty years from now, thirty, forty, all the way up to death. Okay, once you’ve died, just visualize what happens to the body. And sometimes there’s a strong sense of samvega that comes with that, because you realize that this body that you’ve been taking so much care of, that you’ve gotten to the point where you identify with it as yourself, is just going to turn into a corpse, just like everybody else’s bodies. There’s no way you can love it at that point. No matter how much you love it beforehand, you’ve just got to leave it at that point. The question is, what’s left? Well, there’s still awareness left. What’s the quality of that awareness going to be? If it’s tied up with a lot of attachment, it’s just going to latch onto something else. And who knows what it’s going to latch onto next? These things can be awfully random, because the forces of karma are so complex. The good and the bad that you’ve done, who knows what’s going to come rushing in at that point? What kind of body are you going to latch onto next time? Once you’ve developed the skill in not latching on, it’s going to be a lot easier. If you haven’t gone totally beyond your definements at that point, at least you’re going to latch onto something good, because you have the mindfulness to choose. And then just grab at whatever comes your way. So this is one of the reasons why we have to develop this sense of detachment to our own bodies. It’s not that we hate them or anything. It’s just that you realize that we’re only here together with them for a certain time, and then we’re going to have to part ways. If you haven’t practiced beforehand, it’s going to be really messy, and you have to part. But if you’ve practiced, okay, then you’ve got a leg up. You’ve got the advantage. The same goes with attachment to sensual pleasures. That’s the second thing that you’ve got to learn how to let go of if you want to be beyond fear of death. If you’re attached to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, ideas, okay, there comes a point where you can’t have these things anymore. You’ve got to leave them. And again, if you’re really attached to them, on the one hand, as you leave them, there’s going to be a lot of grief, a lot of suffering. And then there’s going to be the tendency to want to grab onto anything that comes. So you approach death with fear, and then you handle death in a really messy way, if you haven’t overcome your attachment to these things. So go ahead and reflect on them. This is one of the reasons why we have the reflection on the requisites, because these are some of the things we’re most attached to. Food is one of the big things. Food, clothing, shelter, medicine. Lust and greed. These are all things that just keep tying us down when we realize we’re going to have to leave these things with a lot of fear. But if you get used to letting go of them and realizing, bringing the mind to a point where it doesn’t have to depend on these things for its sense of well-being, then there’s no fear of death, because you realize you’re not losing anything of any real value. So this is why these contemplations are so necessary and so important. The third quality that’s required for having no fear of death is not having done anything cruel. When you’ve been kind, when you’ve been helpful, and haven’t been cruel to other people, other beings. When there has been a position of weakness in comparison to you, then there’s nothing to fear at death. You realize, to the extent that there’s a place for people who have been kind, that’s where you’re going to go. You’re not headed for a place where cruel people go. This is why the precepts are so important, the whole principle of not harming. This is one of the foundation principles in the Buddhist teachings, the desire not to harm either yourself or other people. If you abandon this principle, you’ve abandoned the Dharma, and you’ve abandoned any sense of confidence as you go through life and as you approach death. So the principle of not harming is another really important teaching to help us overcome fear of death. The fourth principle, which underlies the other three, is having come to an end to your doubts about the Dharma. As long as you haven’t had your first taste of awakening, there are bound to be doubts. Even in these other principles, is it really true that you can be free of fear at the prospect of dying? Is it really true that you can overcome your attachment to the body, that you can overcome your attachment to sensual pleasures? Does behaving in line with the principle of harmlessness really protect you? When you have your first taste of awakening, those doubts will be gone. You realize that there is something deathless in the mind that’s not touched by aging, illness, and death. It’s not just that you’ve heard about it or you believe in it. You’ve actually experienced it. Or, let’s say, the experience is there. In that experience, there’s no sense of “you” at all. But that’s the whole thing. Your sense of what is “you” right now, whether it’s Peter or Chong or Matthew or Grandma or anybody. You realize that when those things go, okay, there’s something of real value that still remains. Once you’ve had that experience and you realize that death doesn’t hold any dangers, any fears, that’s how you can approach death, without fear. So the practice that we’re doing here is a very important practice to overcome the basic fear in life. When you can live without fear in this way, then it’s a lot easier to do what really is appropriate for whatever occasion presents itself to you. Those mountains are moving in, but you can continue doing good. That’s because you’re not fazed by them, because you realize that what the mountains crush is not important. The important things don’t get crushed. And things that do get crushed weren’t really worth holding on to anyhow. I mean, you can use them as tools, but then when the time comes that you have to let them go, okay, there’s no problem. When you can overcome that fear, all the other fears in life, we can as well.

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