Skills for Dying

July, 2002

The Buddha recommends that we think about aging, illness, and death every day, not so that we can get depressed, but so that we can not be complacent, to realize there’s important work to be done in our lives, and we don’t know how much time there is left. Then there’s the whole question of what happens at death itself. He says there are skills that you can learn to prepare yourself for it, so that in what comes it doesn’t knock you off balance. Because there is a part of the mind that doesn’t die. So death is not the end. If it were the end, there would be no need to practice for it. Everybody can die. It doesn’t take much skill. But there is a skill, given the fact that death isn’t the end of things. There’s more that comes after death. In fact, what we’re doing right now is practicing that skill. My teacher once said, “This is how you learn how to die properly, is meditation.” That’s what happens at that time. You just have to start giving up everything. You have to start letting go of things. Things that you used to be able to do, you can’t do anymore. Things you used to be able to hold on to, say, “This should do that, and that should do this, this hand should go there, that foot should go there,” you can’t do it anymore. There’s less control over what the mind’s going to think. But the way you deal with those thoughts, that is something you can learn how to master. Because look at what you’re doing right now. You’re just letting go of your thoughts of the past, letting go of your thoughts of the future, staying right here with the breath, or whatever you’ve chosen as your meditation team. There’s a lot of letting go right there. People who practice letting go find it easier and easier. If you don’t have any practice, if you’re used just to holding on, then you find it very hard. So we’re practicing how to let go right here. All things that weigh down are a burden on the mind. You don’t have to wait until your dying moments to reap the benefits of the practice. You’ve got them right now. Whatever is a burden to the mind, and often the past and the future are just that. It’s a burden. It takes a lot of energy just to think up the past, to think up the future, these little worlds that we create for ourselves. For the time being, we’re just going to cut right through, stay with the sensation of the breath in and of itself, the body in and of itself. Whatever is here in the present moment, that’s what you’re going to hold on to. You don’t start translating it into something else. If you do, the sensations of the breath, you find that they will create little pictures in the mind. When you breathe in a particular way, certain pictures will come up, and you latch on to the pictures. Sometimes there will be sounds, there will be words, something that comes up that makes you lose your frame of reference and go someplace else. That’s precisely the process of rebirth. The mind creates another world for itself. It can’t live in this body, it can’t live in this particular experience anymore, and so it replaces it with another one. It’s like going from one dream to another dream. It’s precisely the same process. That’s why it’s such an important thing to get into the present moment, to see what’s actually going on, to try to get backstage. All too often we look at our minds like people in a movie theater. We just sit there and watch the screen. It doesn’t take much to convince yourself that there really are people up there on the screen. You can laugh, you can cry, you can get excited. You can get scared, whatever the emotion they’re trying to elicit out of you. But if you really went up and looked at the screen very closely, what would you see? It’s just flashes of light. You know, it’s that glittery surface that reflects things back at you. When you get up close, you realize, well, there’s nothing there to get excited about. Nothing’s really happening there. At least nothing worth all your tears and all your excitement. That’s precisely what the meditation teaches you. It’s all the suffering that we create for ourselves through these little worlds that we cook up for ourselves. It’s really not worth it. There’s nothing there that’s worth all the fuss and bother we create around it. This helps us to get less and less diluted by these worlds that we create. So when the big shift comes, you realize, well, it’s the same process happening over and over again. The mind creates another world for itself. It latches onto another level of being. There it goes. It tunes into a different experience, into a different body. At the very least, you want to have some control over what it’s doing. So make sure you turn into a good level of being, that you’re able to keep your mindfulness throughout the whole process. That’s why we work on these two very basic qualities throughout the meditation, mindfulness and alertness. Mindfulness means just keeping in mind what you need to know. In particular, keeping in mind a particular frame of reference, like the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mental states in and of themselves. In other words, you don’t relate them to what they mean or what their objects are. You just see the state as something in and of itself, as an event in the mind. You watch it. It comes and it goes. And you watch it more carefully, and you begin to see how it comes, how it goes. If it’s a good state, a skillful state, you see how you can keep it going to make it develop. If it’s an unskillful one, you begin to see what you can do to let go of it, stop participating in it. Then there are what they call mental qualities in and of themselves, skillful and unskillful qualities. Mindfulness is the number one skillful one that you want to work on. From that, grow the other skillful qualities. The next one, which is your ability to sort of separate out what is skillful and what’s unskillful in the mind. Right now, for the purpose of concentration practice, anything that pulls you away from the breath is unskillful. Any thought that brings you back, gives you encouragement, that’s a skillful thought. You want to develop it. It’s not that you’re not allowed to think while you meditate. Sometimes you have to think just to encourage yourself, to remind yourself of what you’re doing, why you’re doing it. Especially if you’re sitting here for an hour and around forty, forty-five minutes and your legs start hurting. Nothing seems to be happening. No lights, no action. You remind yourself that you’re not here for the lights, for the action. You’re here to watch your mind, to get to know the mind. Then you remind yourself of why it’s important to know the mind. After all, the mind is the source of all the things we experience. It’s a combination of past karma and present karma. That all comes out of the mind, ultimately. So if you can train the mind, you’ve got everything in line. You’ve got the source straightened out. When the source is straightened out, everything else has to eventually straighten out as well. So sometimes if you find it hard to stay with the breath, you think about other things that will help you bring you back to the breath. This morning we talked about the recollections, the recollection of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. It’s not just meant to think about things in the past, like the Buddha who lived 2,600 years ago, or the Dharma that’s in books, or the Sangha, the members of the Sangha that you’ve read about. But you realize that it all comes down to certain qualities. What makes them good and what makes them worth recollecting is the good qualities they have. What was in a bout the Buddha that made him special? Well, they’re all qualities that human beings can develop. You can develop them, too. What makes the Dharma special? It’s a path of practice that leads to the end of suffering. Well, it’s designed for human beings to follow. What makes the Sangha special? Their dedication to the practice. Well, you can commit yourself to the practice, too. The same with the other recollections. Recollection of generosity, recollection of virtue, what they call recollection of the devas. The first two are obvious. When you start getting discouraged in your practice, when you think about the good that you’ve done as a kind of encouragement, and it’s also an encouragement to keep on doing good so you have fresh, good things to think about, that you’re not a total deadweight on the world. You’ve been generous. You’ve been virtuous. You keep on doing it. That’s the foundation for your practice. As for recollection of the devas, what that means is you think about the qualities that make human beings endodavas, which are primarily a sense of shame and a sense of conscience. Shame here doesn’t mean being ashamed of yourself, but when the idea of doing something unskillful, something harmful, comes to the mind, you would be ashamed to do it. It’s beneath you. So it’s actually the mirror side of a sense of your own honor, a sense of your own dignity as a human being, of your own worth as a human being. You’re better than that kind of action. And then there’s a sense of concern about the results of your action. You don’t want to do anything that’s going to be harmful. These two qualities are things that you can develop. You’ve got that potential within you. All these thoughts are skillful thoughts that help bring you back to the breath when you find it difficult to stay or when you find yourself getting discouraged. They counteract unskillful thoughts, thoughts like laziness, thoughts of wanting to give up. The purpose of all this practice is to learn how to look at your thoughts without getting inside them, but to step back from them a little bit and say, “Where would that thought lead if I follow it? Where would this thought lead if I follow it?” You begin to get a sense of what’s worth getting involved in and what’s not. Think of your mind like a committee. Not everything that’s brought to the committee floor or brought up for discussion is something you have to be responsible for. You can decide, “No, I don’t want that. Just let it alone.” That’s the second skillful quality that we’re trying to develop, the ability to sort out what’s skillful and what’s unskillful. Building on that, the Buddha recommends persistence. Just keep at this process again and again and again so that it becomes habitual. As you get more and more skillful at getting the mind to settle down, working with the breath so that it feels comfortable, and letting that comfortable sensation slip and spread out through the body, hook up with other comfortable sensations that are already there, you find that there’s a sense of fullness, a sense of refreshment that comes with the breathing. Then you tune in to that sense of fullness. Oftentimes, when it starts out, there’s not much there. It’s just a nice, easy, comfortable state. But you try to stay tuned to it. In staying tuned, you strengthen it so that it really does become a sense of fullness, a real absorbing sense of refreshment. When the mind and body feel refreshed like this, then they grow tranquil, serene, so that the whole process requires less and less effort. When that happens, then the mind gets firmly established, firmly centered, right here in the present moment. The more firm it is, the more it can feel equanimity for the things around it, the things that come in and go out, the vagrant thoughts that still have to sneak into the mind, sneak out, pains that may arise here and there in the body. You feel equanimity because you’re not involved. You have a solid basis for the mind. You don’t have to go jumping into those other things. These seven qualities taken together are called factors for awakening. When they’re solid in the mind, they make the mind clear and ready to cut through any unscalable qualities that may come. When they grow strong, they really can take you all the way to awakening. But even if you don’t reach that stage yet, still they provide the mind with a good, solid foundation so that no matter what happens, you’ll be awakened. Those are the kind of skillful qualities you want to work on. Because remember, when the Buddha talks about aging, illness, and death in those five recollections, he doesn’t stop with those. He goes on to the issue of karma. So he doesn’t stop with the depressing things. He opens up hope. What you do can make a difference. In particular, how you train the mind makes a big difference in how you experience things, so that events that normally would knock you over have no effect on you at all. This way you gain more and more confidence in the power of the mind. So even when it has to leave the body, it’s not left bereft. It’s not adrift. It’s got these good qualities as its own internal treasures. It’s a guarantee that it’s unshaken by anything. So that’s what we’re doing here as we sit here with our eyes closed. We’re learning the basic skills for living in this world and also the basic skills that are needed when we have to leave this particular lifetime. Skills that are needed to maintain the stability, the sense of balance, the sense of well-being in the mind. Without these skills, we’re just subject to everything that comes in and out the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind. But with these skills, we’re more in charge. We have a place of security. We have our refuge. So those qualities that we think about when we recollect the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, we find that they’re there in the mind. And that’s why they do us the most good.

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