Death Is All Around

December 26, 2005

The sutta we chanted just now, not self-characteristic, is often chanted at funerals, because the fact of death is one of the big things that really puts the teaching on not-self, pushes it right into your face. Someday, you’re going to die. This body that’s been yours all along is not going to be yours anymore. People around you are going to die—the people we love, the people we claim as my father, my mother, my sister, my brother, my friend. All of a sudden, that person is just a body, a dead body, something you would no longer want to lay claim to. You have to get rid of it as fast as possible. And if you wait until the time of death in order to think about these things, it’s a huge shock. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has you contemplate it before death. Actually, the body is showing that it’s not you or it’s not yours all along. When you cut your hair, when you cut your nails—before you cut them, it’s your hair, they’re your nails—but when you cut them, they just become dirt on the ground, something you want to sweep away. It shows you how arbitrary the idea of “me” or “mine” is. And it’s good to reflect on that again and again and again. These things that you claim as yours, exactly how long are they going to lie in your power? And even before they leave you, they show they’re not totally under your power. When the body gets sick, it doesn’t ask your permission. It doesn’t schedule your illnesses so they’re convenient. As for old age, it creeps up on you. We look at old people and forget that as far as they’re concerned, someplace in there, there’s still the belief that they’re still a young person, that the aging is something that has nothing to do with them. Of course, the body doesn’t ask permission to grow old. It just does it. So you’ve got something that’s not totally under your control, and someday it’s going to totally leave you. So what are you going to do with it? That’s the important question. How much use are we going to get out of this body? How much good are we going to get out of this body? Before we have to give it up. If you simply hold on to the body as yours, or hold on to the sensual pleasures you get from the body as the main thing you gain from the body, then you’re really setting yourself up for trouble. You get more and more attached to these things, and then when death comes, it’s going to deprive you of them. Just thinking about death is enough to scare you. The pleasures you had the body hold on to, it’s not going to be yours anymore. That’s getting the wrong things out of the body. What if you put the body to good use? Observing the precepts, being generous, sitting here meditating, doing walking meditation, that’s good use for the body. Because the mind benefits. Ultimately, you put the mind in a position where it doesn’t need these things anymore. It doesn’t need to hold on. That’s when it’s really well off. Because then, if the body goes, it’s not going to have an impact on the mind. So think of the body as something you’ve borrowed for a while. It may not lie totally under your power, but to the extent to which it does lie under your power, try to get the most out of it in terms of developing good qualities of the mind. The Buddha said your true treasures are not things outside. It’s not the body, it’s not material things. Your true treasures are things like conviction in the principle of your actions, a sense of shame at the idea of doing something that’s not noble, concern for the harm that can come from unskillful actions, virtue, learning, discernment, generosity. These things are your treasures. People can take your body away from you, they can kill you, but they can’t take these other treasures away from you. So what you’re doing is you’re storing up as much of your real valuables as you can, so that when the time comes that you have to be separated from other things, there’s no problem. You’ve got something really good inside that nobody can take away, that nobody can touch, that no event, the coming or going of the body, the aging of the body, illness, death, won’t have an impact. The same teaching applies to all the other aggregates, the feeling, perception, thought constructs, consciousness. You turn these things into a path. Focus on the breath, develop feelings of ease, spread them throughout the body, use your direct thought and evaluation, which are thought constructs, to keep your mind on the breath and to evaluate the breath. Then you’re aware of all these things. It’s taking these five aggregates and turning them into a path. They may not be yours, they may not be you, but you can use them as tools. And then when, as tools, they’ve done their job, you can put them aside. So when the Buddha says the body is not yours, that it’s not yourself, it doesn’t belong to you, that doesn’t mean that you just sort of throw it away. When the other aggregates are not you or yourself, you don’t throw them away. You’re very careful to look after them in the proper way. Use them to look after them as you would look after valuable tools, but only to that extent. Realize that with any tool, there are times when you have to put them down, there are times when you have to abandon them. But if you use those tools to discover a treasure that’s really valuable, then there’s no problem. If you haven’t, then there’s a real problem. You’re up the creek. You have nothing at all to show for this human life. So when you value these aggregates, learn how to value them in the right way. They’re useful tools. They can be used to achieve the Deathless. After all, the Deathless being unconditioned, being unfabricated, you can’t use the Deathless to find the Deathless. You’ve got to use these fabricated things, these makeshift things. But that’s the beauty of the Buddhist path—taking these makeshift things and using them to find something that’s not makeshift, something that’s totally unlimited and free. Once you find that, then it’s really easy to let go of these things, because you’ve got something a lot better. And when you think of the various things you could live for in this life, there’s really nothing else that compares.

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