A Refuge from Death

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The Buddha said there are four reasons why people are afraid of death. One is that they’re attached to sensual pleasures. They’re afraid that at death they’ll be deprived of their sensual pleasures. Another is that they’re attached to their body. They know that at death they’ll have to leave the body. The third is that they’ve done cruel and harmful things in their life, and they’re afraid of the possibility that they may be punished for those cruel and harmful things after death. And the fourth is that they have doubts about the true Dhamma. They don’t know. Is death annihilation? Is it non-annihilation? What happens? What is there of lasting value in this life that might be able to survive death? They’re in doubt about that. So the whole thing is a big mystery. And when it’s a mystery, it’s scary. A Brahmin once went to see the Buddha and he said he didn’t think there was anybody in the world who wasn’t afraid of death. And the Buddha said that there are people who are not afraid of death. They haven’t done anything cruel, they’re not attached to the bodies, they’re not attached to sensual pleasures, and they’ve ended their doubts about the Dhamma. So this is an important aspect of the practice. We’re doing this to learn how to practice so that we can overcome our fear of death. This is the way in which the Dhamma offers a refuge. We often think of the Dhamma as a refuge, as something outside. The words written in the books appear in the bookcases. And that’s an auxiliary refuge. The real refuge, though, is when the Dhamma appears inside. When we practice the Dhamma, having listened to it, and then we practice it, and then we attain the Dhamma. So it’s in developing this refuge inside, through the practice of virtue, that we can attain virtue, concentration, and discernment. That’s what ultimately offers our truest protection. And it takes us beyond fear of death. Of those four reasons for fear, one of them deals with our outside behavior, the way we treat other people, other beings. This is what the precepts are for, that you follow the precepts and then you look at your behavior and realize that you’ve done nothing to harm anybody. So there’s no fear from that quarter. Even then, though, there’s a possibility that you might start thinking back on the things you did before you took on the precepts. If you have no control over your mind, it’s very easy to focus on all the cruel and harmful things that you did. So ultimately, meditation deals with all four. One, bringing your mind under control so it doesn’t go wandering off into things that are harmful and hurtful. It’s important to remember that when the Buddha talked about precepts, he talked about karma. He said, “Thinking back on the bad things you did in the past is useful only when you take it as an incentive not to do those things again. If you do it and start getting tied up in remorse and guilt, that’s not helpful at all. No matter how remorseful you are, you can’t go back and erase what you did. The remorse actually weakens your mind so that you don’t have the strength to reframe from actions like that in the future. So this requires a certain ability to gain some control over your thoughts. This is why we practice concentration to keep the mind on one object and give it something good to hold on to so that it doesn’t feel tempted to go wandering off and feeding in its old ways. So when you find the mind wandering off, bring it back to the breath. If it keeps wandering off, then look at the things that you’re wandering off to feed on. Look for their drawbacks. When anger comes up, ask yourself,”Why are you angry? What do you get out of it?” When you look at it with a fair mind, you realize you don’t get much. It’s certainly not all that worth all the trouble that it causes the mind. What would happen if you let yourself think those thoughts of anger for twenty-four hours? Well, it just eats away, eats away at your mind at the same time. You get more and more likely to do and say things that you’re going to later regret. Sometimes that realization is enough to help drop the anger. If that doesn’t work, you can consciously ignore the anger. Think of it as being one voice in the committee of your mind. Let it be in the back corner. Don’t put it on front stage. In other words, you know it’s there, it’s chattering away, but you just decide you’re not going to focus there. If that doesn’t work, notice how when you’re thinking, there’s tension in the body, there’s tension in the mind. It takes energy to keep thinking about things. If you can notice where the tension is, where the effort is, just relax it. Especially if you can sense where in the body there’s the tension that corresponds to the thought. Just kind of zap the tension, breathe right through it, and the thought doesn’t have any foundation. It collapses. If that doesn’t work, as the Buddha said, grit your teeth, press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, and just determine you aren’t going to crush down any thought that has to do with that anger or whatever the distraction is. It’s the steamroller approach. These are the five main ways of dealing with distractions. So, obey yourself of all of them, whichever one is the best. Just be aware of what is needed, not at any particular time. This way you gain some control over your mind so it doesn’t go wandering off into things that are harmful. It gets ready to settle down here and it finds a state. It’s able to develop a sense of ease while being in the present moment. You can adjust the breath to any way you like, so it feels good to be right here. Adjust your focus so that it’s not too heavy, in other words, clamping down on the flow of blood in the body, and it’s not too light that it’s easily blown away. You get a sense of just right, and that’s the beginning of a sense of refuge inside. You have a place in the mind where you can go. Even if you don’t get any greater insights than this, at least you’ve got something to hold on to. Because when death comes, everything is going to get snatched, snatched, snatched away. What will remain will be just a sense of bare awareness. And the closer you can bring your mind to that sense of awareness by making it still, by keeping it bright and clear in the present moment, then when other things get snatched away, you don’t feel like you’re being snatched away or anything really valuable is being snatched away. So that provides a lot of protection right there. And it’s even better when you’ve reflected on the body, reflected on your sensual pleasures that you’re so attached to. This is why we have that chant on the 32 parts of the body that everybody complains so much about. If you hold on to the body, then when the time comes to part, it gets messy. Even before you part, the body gets messy anyhow. You get old, this can’t function, that can’t function. You can’t even wipe yourself. If you’re lucky, you have other people to come and care for you, but then you depend on their moods and their sense of frustration that they have to look after you. If you don’t have anybody, you lie in your own excrement, and it’s miserable. So it’s best to learn to get some detachment from the body while you’re healthy. While you’re strong enough to realize that although the body is useful in many ways, you can’t hold on to it as an end in and of itself. And again, when you get a greater sense of the mind as being separate from the body, the awareness is one thing, the body is an object, and the stronger you make that awareness, the more continuous you get a sense that it really is separate. It’s like the drop of water on a lotus leaf. Have you ever seen lotuses in Thailand or in Asia? They have these tiny, tiny hairs all over the lotus leaf. You put water on it and the hairs are so small that the water can’t even seep into the leaf. It just rides as a bead over the top of the hairs, on the surface of the leaf. So the awareness is like the drop of water. The body is like the lotus leaf. The awareness just doesn’t seep in. That makes it easier to stand apart from the body and all the sufferings it inflicts on you. You still have that sense of awareness. That’s your valuable possession. You hold on to that. The same with sensual pleasures. You learn to look at them, especially if you’ve got a state of concentration going in the mind. You look at them and you compare them. The ease and well-being, the sense of fullness that comes from being concentrated, as opposed to the tension, the grasping, the hunger, comes from grasping after any sensual pleasure you can find. You compare them and after a while you get a sense of dismay, a sense of detachment. As this grows deeper, you get thoroughly disenchanted. It’s a good exercise to read all the Buddhist similes on sensual pleasures. It’s like a dog gnawing on some bones. It gnaws on the bones, hoping to get some meat, but the only nourishment it gets is its own saliva. Compare it to a drop of honey on a knife. Or a crow that’s gotten a piece of meat and other crows come to grab it and tear it away. Those are things we do in order to hang on to sensual pleasure. They really put us in a lot of danger. And the amount of real gratification we get from them. Where is it? The sensual pleasures you had last week, where are they now? As your powers of concentration get stronger, you get more and more disenchanted with these things when you reflect on them. But the most important of the causes of fear of death is uncertainty about the Dhamma. You haven’t reached the Deathless yet, so it’s still a question mark. It’s just a concept. Did the Buddha teach? Was it right? Was it right only for his time? Is it not right for ours? Was the path he taught there the right path? Did he leave anything out? As long as you haven’t seen the Deathless inside, death is going to hold a lot of fear. But once you’ve practiced to the point where you’ve gained insight into the mind’s process of fabrication and learned to take it apart to the point where you’ve learned to the point where there is no intention of the mind, what’s left is the Deathless. It’s there. When you see it, you realize, one, the Buddha knew what he was talking about, and two, he also taught the right way to get there. You followed his teachings. You look at what you did. This is important. Some people talk about awakening experiences where they don’t know what happened. Suddenly, bang, they were going through all kinds of turmoil inside. This issue was eating them up. That issue was eating them up. And then one day, everything just fell away. There’s a great sense of relief, but they don’t know how it happened. That’s not awakening. Technically, that’s called a neurotic breakthrough. That’s not what the Buddha was talking about. When you reach awakening, you know how you did it, because you have to understand the principles of intention, action, and the mind enough so that when there is no intention, you know there is no intention, because you’re thoroughly familiar with intention of all kinds. This is why awakening is not just a spiritual accident. You sit around waiting for the accident to happen. That’s not the case at all. It comes through a thorough understanding. This is why the Buddha said discernment is part of the path. You discern how intentions shape your experience, and you also discern how you can refine them to the point where there are no more intentions. That’s the point that ends all your doubts about the deathless, all your doubts about the Dhamma. And that’s when your refuge gets really secure. The refuge that’s based on concentration is not all that certain. Some people find that they can maintain their powers of concentration through the difficult indignities of aging. Some people find that they fall to pieces, but the deathless is not affected by that at all. So that’s when your refuge is secure. As we’re practicing, we’re moving in that general direction, trying to create a refuge that’s more and more solid, more and more secure, a place that we can stay when everything else goes crazy. And if at the moment of death all you’ve got is concentration, well, make the most of that concentration. That is your refuge. You can hold on there. That is the safe place, because the quality of your mind has a large influence on where it’s going to go when it leaves the body. So you make use of what you’ve got. But if you have the time, you keep working to see if you can reach the refuge that’s more secure. Otherwise, you can’t be complacent. But in either event, it’s a lot better than being a person who just doesn’t have any idea of how to find refuge within at all. So many of us identify with our bodies when we die. It’s like we’re being pushed out of the only thing we know. It’s something that we’ve held on to for a long, long time. And it’s scary. When the mind is put in a position like that, it’ll grab on to anything it can find. And for the most part, if it hasn’t been trained, it just grabs on to who knows what. But if you’ve been training the mind, you’ve at least got some idea of where it’s going to go. You’ve got something to hold on to as a refuge. It’s important that you trust in that. You have faith in that. And you’ve tasted the deathlets. It’s no longer a question of faith. It’s a question of knowledge. You know you can hang on here and be safe. You reach full Awakened. There’s no need to hang on to anything at all. So do your best to find this refuge inside. Work on the virtue that protects you from having memories of cruel things you’ve done in the past. Work on the concentration that can help pry you away from your attachment to the body, your attachment to sensual objects. And work on the discernment that ends all your doubts about the Dhamma. That’s the way the refuge in the Dhamma moves from something outside to something that’s right here, right now. And it’s with you at all times. So even when death comes, there’s nothing to faze you.

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