Respecting Death

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Meditation is a skill. You can do it well, you can do it poorly. Most people don’t like to hear about that. Sometimes you’re told that there’s no such thing as a good meditation or a bad meditation, that it’s all good. But that’s not true. The issue is how you use it. How you judge what’s good and what’s not good and how you react to the judgment. When you notice that things aren’t going well, you have to accept the fact that, yes, that’s not well. They could be better. But then the next question is, how are you going to react to that? Do you get yourself tied up in recriminations? That’s an unskillful use of your powers of judgment. The skillful use is to learn to look for cause and effect. When things aren’t going well, why aren’t they going well? Try out different approaches to see what works and what doesn’t work. In that way, you learn that your powers of judgment actually are an important part of developing this skill. So try to bring all your skills. Compare all your skillful qualities of mind. The Buddha said that skillful qualities are all rooted in heedfulness, the realization that there are dangers in life. Aging, illness, and death are big dangers, but we can prepare for them. If we couldn’t prepare for them, if we were totally left adrift, there’d be nothing to do to prepare. There’d be no need to be heedful. There are dangers, but there’s something we can do about them. We can learn how to face those dangers without suffering. That’s why we have to put energy into the practice, because you don’t know when they’re going to hit. For some of us, aging is going to be quite a ways down the line. For others of us, it’s already here. Actually, aging starts as soon as you’re born. But it does get really bad as you’re further down the line. Death could happen at any time. You have to respect that. That’s what respect for death means, realizing that it is a big danger. On the one hand, respect for death, aging, illness, and death, means that you have to learn not to be disgusted by people who show really bad signs of aging, illness, and death. In other words, people who are not aging gracefully, who are going through severe illnesses, or whose death is really miserable. You have to remember that they are human beings, too. Some people will refuse to go see someone who’s dying because they don’t want to see that person in such bad shape. Well, that person is still a person. If you can offer some kindness, some help, it’s important that you not get put off by all the gross physical details of what happens to a body as it ages and as it grows ill, as it dies. That’s one kind of respect for death, aging, illness, and death. But another kind requires that you respect the fact that these really are big dangers in life. The body grows less and less and less under your control. Things start falling apart. You realize that what you thought you could control, you can’t anymore. There’s that great line in the Canon. The king who doesn’t understand that line, “The world is swept away. It does not endure.” “What does this mean?” he says. He’s an eighty-year-old man. Ratabala the monk that he’s talking to says, “When you were young, were you strong?” And the king says, “Yes, I thought I had the strength of two men.” “How about now?” “Oh, sometimes I mean to put my foot in one place and I end up putting it someplace else.” The body just goes totally out of your control, no matter how much work you put into keeping it fit and strong and healthy. It grows more and more out of control. Your mind can also grow more and more out of control, but this is where meditation can make a difference. If you learn how to control your thoughts, you can have control over what you’re identifying with at any particular time. If you’re identifying with your thwarted desires, again, it makes the process of aging and illness and death just more and more miserable. But if you can develop mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment, you can pare this area of your identification. So when the body goes, you realize that it’s just the body. You don’t have to identify with it. When your brain starts malfunctioning, you realize, “Okay, this is just the brain malfunctioning.” You don’t have to get upset by it. You can see through its illusions. When he came out of the operation, it wasn’t long before he realized that they had made a mistake. When they had turned off some of the arteries, they had pinched one of the arteries that went to his brain. His brain was not functioning properly. But he’d been meditating enough up to that point to be able to realize, “Okay, the brain is not functioning properly.” There were times when he would think something and then his brain would send him a message that he’d also said it. A person who wasn’t mindful might get upset that nobody was responding to what he’d said. But he began to realize, “Okay, this is a wrong message.” Or vice versa, when he actually said something when he thought they’d only thought it. And people started reacting. They began to realize, “Okay, the brain is not sending me good information.” He had the mindfulness and the alertness to step back and not get taken in by the misinformation he was getting from his brain. Ultimately, over time, his brain finally recovered. But the fact that he’d been meditating meant that it involved a lot less suffering, both for himself and for the people around him. So you have to have respect for these things. The body can malfunction. Death is not pretty. Death is not pleasant. We like to think that our lives will have a nice sense of closure, but usually it doesn’t close off that way. It just fragments. Things unravel. Sometimes you see the things that you’ve worked hard at all your life just falling apart before your eyes. This is why the meditation is so important. It’s one of the few things that can see you through that experience so that you don’t suffer. This is why recollection of death is traditionally used to spur you on to practice, to be heedful, to get over your laziness. You realize you don’t know how much time you have, and death is a big problem. Sometimes the suffering of death is minimized. People say, “Well, of course, death is a part of life, and you want to live, don’t you? So we have to accept that death is part of it as well and try to prettify it.” That’s basically an annihilationist view, i.e., the idea that once death is over, there’s nothing left. So if you’re going to celebrate life, you have to celebrate death, too. That’s not the Buddhist take on it. Death is what follows on birth, but there’s a state of mind that doesn’t have to experience birth and death. There’s a dimension of the mind, let’s put it that way, that lies beyond these things. That’s where true happiness lies. So for them, the connection between birth and death sends the message, “Okay, let’s go to something that’s beyond birth and death.” The opposite of what you hear nowadays, which is that, after all, you can’t have life without death, so if you’re going to celebrate life, let’s celebrate death. Well, there’s nothing to celebrate in death. It’s miserable. The separation, the pain, the disorientation that can often come. You’ve got to have respect for these things. These are big dangers. It’s like going out in the wilderness. You have to have respect for the fact that there are bears out there, there are other animals, there are all kinds of things that can happen, so you prepare. If you don’t prepare, you’re not showing respect for the dangers. So, meditation is preparation. It’s suffering there, but also respecting the fact that you’ve got this training that can prepare you, using your concentration, using your discernment, using your mindfulness and alertness to sidestep all the potential dangers that are out there. If you meditate well enough to have a taste of that, then you’re going to be able to have the deathless before that happens, before the death comes. Then you’re in a much better position. Because you know for sure, as you’re going into the experience, there’s something there that doesn’t die. As the Buddha said, there are four reasons we fear death. One is because we’re going to miss all the sensual pleasures we’ve had in life. The second is we’re going to realize we have to abandon the body that we’re so attached to. The third is, if you’ve done anything cruel in life, there’s always a possibility that you’re going to have to suffer the consequences of that cruelty. And the fourth is being uncertain about the true Dhamma. This is the important one. If you know the true Dhamma, there really is a deathless. That takes a lot of the fear of death away right there. So this is how we prepare. We develop the mental skills that we need. You’re not slipping away. You’re in a position where you can let them go. Let them do their own thing without you having to suffer, without you having to have them ripped away from your grasp. So be heedful, because everything is skillful that you’re going to do. And development in life depends on heedfulness as its root.

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