Fear of Death

June 14, 2007

When you begin meditating, the first thing you notice is not how wonderful your meditation object is. You notice the problems of pain and distraction. They constantly seem to pull you away. Actually, they’re not pulling you. You’re going after them, because the mind has that habit of going after these things. That’s the way the mind is now. Don’t think it’s going to be any different when you die. Those are going to be the two big problems you face—pain and distraction. At that point, the pain and the distraction will be a lot more compelling. If you want to prepare for that eventuality so the mind isn’t driven around by these things, you have to get practice now while you’re still relatively healthy, relatively strong. You’re not seeing your life fall to pieces all around you. So that when pain comes, you’re familiar with how to deal with it, how to sidestep it, how to watch it without getting sucked in. And the same with distraction, your ability to see a thought form and realize that you have the choice. You can go with it or not, as you choose. It’s a long-term habit of going into these things without even thinking. The first order of business when you meditate is how to learn not to get involved with these at all. In other words, your constant choice is, “I’m not going there.” Only when you’re able to carry through with that choice consistently, then you can start entertaining the other choice, which is, “Allow this thing to come and I’m going to watch it very carefully without getting sucked in so I can understand where it’s coming from, where it’s going, and how I can stay in the midst of it without being consumed by it, without being carried away.” In both cases, you have to first give the mind a good place to stay. This is why we work with the breath. It becomes your natural basis of operation and your natural foundation, natural in the sense that you’ve made it habitual. It helps, of course, when the breath is comfortable. After all, there is an intentional element in the breath. This is why it’s called bodily fabrication. The word sankhara in Pali for fabrication also carries the meaning of intention. So you can intend to breathe in a comfortable way. A lot of the skill in meditation is learning how to follow through with that intention so that you’re not forcing the breath. You’re not forcing the breath too much, you’re not messing with it too much, and actually making it more uncomfortable. And you’re getting the right touch. What kind of breathing feels good? What kind of breathing feels best for the body right now? Sometimes the body needs energetic breathing. Sometimes it needs calming breathing. Deep, shallow, heavy, light. Lots of different ways you can breathe. Lots of different places in the body you can focus. And you want to familiarize yourself both with the needs of the body and how they can be met by the breath. That’s why we spend long hours just sitting here watching the breath, so you can learn about it. Think of it as an exploration. If you think of yourself simply tying yourself down to the breath without allowing yourself to think, without allowing yourself to evaluate anything, the mind is going to rebel very quickly. But if you can remind yourself here, it’s the energy that keeps the body alive. It’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. It’s the energy flow throughout the body that enables you to move the parts of the body, that enables you to sense things through the nerves. It’s all breath. Think in that way and you realize how important it is to learn how to breathe skillfully. Breathe with awareness. Breathe with a good sense of what the body needs. Sometimes you have to consciously direct the breath in a particular way. Other times you can simply pose the question in the mind, “What kind of breathing would feel good right now?” And it’s almost as if you allow the body to do its thing. It’ll find a good rhythm. Sometimes that works. Sometimes it doesn’t. But that’s a good way to start. Just ask yourself, “What kind of breathing would feel good right now?” And you watch the breath. Then you can ask yourself, “Would longer breathing feel good?” And the body will respond. It’ll breathe longer for a little while. Then you can decide, “Nope. Or yes, depending on the condition.” There’s a part of the mind that’s already very sensitive to what feels good and what doesn’t feel good, and you can start tapping into that. This gives you a good foundation. When you’ve got a good foundation, you’re coming from a position of strength. And when you’re coming from a position of strength, you’re in a much better position to do the right thing, to make the right choices. Working with this bodily fabrication also includes two other types of fabrication. There’s verbal fabrication, which you direct your thoughts to something, and then you evaluate it. So you direct your thoughts here to the breath, and you learn how to evaluate it with sensitivity. And then there’s feeling and perception. We fabricate those as well, partly through the way we breathe, partly through the way we label things, how we relate to the way we label things. Feelings come in. They do have a certain amount of raw data, but by the time they usually come to consciousness, there’s been some processing going on. There’s an intentional element in that as well. A lot of times the intention is subterranean. It’s become so automatic that you’ve forgotten about it. You’re not paying careful attention. But here, as you breathe, you get more and more sensitive. What are these feelings in the body? How do you understand them? How do you relate to them? Also, how does the way you label them affect them? For instance, when you feel a certain sensation in your leg, if you just tell yourself, “Well, that’s that solid leg down there,” you relate to it in one way. But then if you think, “Well, this could be breath energy,” if it’s breath energy, then it’s been blocked. It’s not flowing. And simply labeling it in a different way gives you new possibilities for how you can deal with it, what you might do with it. If it’s just dead, solid feeling, there’s not much you can do with it. At least, you don’t think there is. But if you label it as breath, breath is energy. Breath can move. It flows. And when it comes up against a blockage, you can think of it flowing around the blockage, flowing through the blockage, maybe changing direction because you’re forcing it in the wrong direction to begin with. There’s lots to play with. So this forms your foundation. This is your basis. Then, when distraction comes, the first thing that happens, usually, is you go back to your old habits. You get distracted. Think about this. Think about that. You’re in this other thought world. And you suddenly remember, “Wait a minute. I’m not supposed to be here. I’m supposed to be back with the breath.” So try to drop the thought world and come back. And be prepared for the fact that other thought worlds are going to come. So be on the lookout to notice how the mind slips off. The more solidly you’re with the breath, the more you’ll be able to see this. And you begin to see the whole series of stages. There’s a little stirring first, kind of in the breath energy, a little tightening someplace in the body. And then you identify that as a little tightening, and then you say, “This is a thought about x.” And then it becomes a thought about x. And then you ride with it. Or you have choices in there. Try to notice it more and more quickly. This is where you can begin to see some progress in your meditation as you get more alert to the mind as it’s about to go off. And you can catch it in earlier and earlier stages of the thought forming and the choice to go with it or not go with it. That’s where you can begin to separate yourself from this process of thought formation. This is the important point. Separate, instead of you taking them on like a pair of clothes and going with them, or jumping into them like a car and riding wherever the car is going to take you. Because that’s a skill you’re going to need all the way throughout life. And at the moment of death, it’d be very handy to be able not to jump into thought worlds, because those thought worlds turn into actual worlds. This is the process of birth and becoming on a little level, but it’s how it happens on the big level. This is one of the Buddha’s great insights. The world at large operates on the same principle as the little thought worlds that we have right now. And the way you relate to your little thought worlds is going to determine how you relate to the world at large. The whole processing of clinging, becoming, birth, that goes on through aging, illness, and death. What you see happening on the micro level is exactly what happens on the macro level. So you want to master the micro level. And that’s going to give you the skills and the tools you need to master the macro level as well. Because when you die, you don’t want to just go wherever these things may take you. Because you’ve seen what you’ve seen during your life, where your thought worlds go. They can go all over the place. You get on a plane and you think you’re going to New York, but you end up going to, what? Australia, India, Bangladesh, Burma, whatever. They don’t always go according to schedule or according to flight plan. The same thing is going to apply to those thought worlds that appear in the mind as death approaches. And particularly if it’s an unpleasant thought world that’s appearing, you want to be able to stay away from it. Realize that this is just a construction of the mind. Because at that point, when the mind is in the position where it’s about to leave the body, it tends to go for these things, whatever, good or bad. So you want to be able to say, “No.” So you learn how to say, “No” now. It’s a skill you can develop. This is why the Buddha focuses so much attention on the issue of death, both to remind you that there’s a lot of work to be done before you go. So you become more and more heedful about how you spend your time. Because you don’t know when it’s going to happen. It’s not the case that we all get lined up by age and then go according to age. There’s no telling who in this room is going to be the first to die. So you want to prepare yourself for that eventuality. One of the reasons why the Buddha teaches mindfulness of death is for the sake of heedfulness. The other is to remind you, though, not to get upset about that or discouraged. It’s to remind you that there is a skill you can develop right now that, at the very least, will make sure that the process goes well and, at the best, helps you discover something that doesn’t die. So you can have that to depend on as the body passes away and all the aggregates fall away. The same principles apply to pain. When you begin the meditation, the first step in dealing with pain is learning how not to go with it. There may be a pain in your knee, a pain in your leg, a pain in your back. The first stage of attack is to learn how to focus someplace else in the body, that no matter how bad the pain may be, you have other places to stay, that you can make comfortable. John Lee gives the analogy of going into a house. Some of the floorboards are rotten, so you don’t step on the rotten floorboards. You step around them so you don’t go falling through. The same with the body. There are going to be aches and pains here and there, so learn how to resist that temptation for the mind to go straight to the pain. There can be a pain there, but just tell yourself, “It’s not my pain, and if I don’t get in the line of fire, it’s not happening to me. It’s just a pain there.” Part of the mind will say, “No, you’ve got to take care of this. You’ve got to worry about it. You’ve got to do something about it.” So you have to resist those thoughts. Say, “No, I can deal with it afterwards. If when I get up from meditation and walk around, there’s still the pain there, then I’ll deal with it. But right now I’m just sitting in a posture that the body’s not used to, so it’s normal that there’s going to be pain. In fact, some of the pain is actually useful. The blood is learning how to go through—well, blood doesn’t learn, but the blood is being forced into capillaries where it normally doesn’t go. The nature of the body is that if its blood is forced in that way consistently enough over time, eventually it will start expanding those capillaries and they’ll turn into major blood vessels. So it’s not the sign that your leg is going to be paralyzed or you’re going to harm yourself permanently by sitting here in meditation. It’s only an hour. You’re actually getting the body used to this position, so a certain amount of pain is normal. So if you can learn how to ignore all those scary narratives that the mind builds around the pain, then it’s easier to stay away from it. Once you’ve mastered that ability to stay away from it and to develop a sense of ease with the breath, one of the things you can do is think of the breath energy that flows around the pain. Maybe part of the pain is being aggravated by the fact that the breath energy is not flowing there properly. So say there’s a pain in your knee. Start thinking about the breath going down the back. Wherever there’s a sense of blockage in your spine, just loosen it up, loosen up, go down vertebrae by vertebrae, down to the tailbone, then out the leg. Think of the breath energy flowing through the knee and out through your toes. See what that does to the sensation of pain there. Sometimes it’ll help it, sometimes not. But you’ve got an extra tool for dealing with the pain. Once you develop those two abilities—one, the ability to stay focused on a different part of the body, develop a sense of ease there, and two, the ability to allow that sense of ease to spread down through the pain—then you’re ready to go right into the pain and say,”What is this sensation of pain? Is it constant? Does it move? The perception, the label I place on the pain, is it accurate? When does the pain seem to be a burden to the mind? When is it not? It’ll come and go. The pain may be constant, but you find sometimes the mind is upset by it, and a few seconds later it’s not. Okay, what happened? Where is the difference?” If you can approach the pain with the desire to comprehend it rather than the desire to make it go away, you learn a lot of important lessons about it. You begin to see that the pain may be there in the body, but it doesn’t have to have an impact on the mind. It’s the way we label the pain that creates a bridge into the mind, over which suffering comes. And so you can learn how to cut the bridge. So even though the pain may still be there in the body, it’s not affecting the mind. And as you learn how to use this approach with minor pains, then you can start dealing with larger pains as well, particularly the pain that comes with a disease, the pain that comes with aging. You’ve got the skill you need. And you find that different pains require different insights. It’s not the case that you learn one insight about the pain, and that’ll take care of pain forever. But you learn the basic technique, which is how to put yourself in a position where you can analyze and make your quest, not the quest to make the pain go away, but the quest to comprehend it. That’s what the Buddha said is the task appropriate for that noble truth of pain. You want to comprehend the pain so that ultimately it’s totally comprehended from all around. Then it poses no dangers, it poses no surprises, it poses no threat to the mind. So in this way, as you’re learning to deal with obstacles to concentration, you’re also learning how to deal with other obstacles that are coming, that are going to come, as you approach death. In this way, many of the Tai Chi Chants will all say meditation is one way of learning how to prepare to die. So you can do it without suffering. And that’s a really important skill. So as you’re sitting here struggling with pain and distraction, realize it’s not just a little thing you’re doing here. You’re learning an important skill. You’re working on skills that are going to stand you in good stead for a long time to come. So each time you’ve learned how to pull yourself out of a distraction or not get overcome by pain, you’re working on that skill. So value these abilities, value these choices, because they really do make a difference. It’s not that you’re imposing an impossible task on the mind and you’d be better off to go away and forget about it. When you find that you’re sitting down and having trouble to get the mind concentrated, don’t think, “Well, maybe this isn’t for me. Maybe I should try something else.” You’re avoiding the skills that you really need to learn how to live properly. Because if you can’t get past pain, pain will start driving you in all directions, even before you die. Pain and fear of pain. Loss and fear of loss. These are the things that drive people to do really unskillful things, even evil things in life. So it’s important that you learn the skills to overcome that potential, your own potential to disappoint yourself, your own potential to suddenly find yourself doing something really harmful, even though you’d rather not do that. When fear and pain push you, when distraction pushes you, if you can’t trust yourself to do the right thing, you need to do a lot of work on the meditation. And if you find yourself really a victim of these things, that’s a sign that this is a strength you’ve got to develop so you can learn how to trust yourself, so you can handle any situation as it comes. It’s ultimately that fear of death and death itself don’t overcome you, that you can stand solid in the face of them. That’s a skill that everybody should learn how to master. And whether it’s easy or not, that’s not the issue. The important thing is that you apply yourself now to mastering that skill and that you value the progress you make in that direction. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2007/070614%20Fear%20of%20Death.mp3>