To Practice Dying

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It’s a common teaching among the Forest of Johns that when we meditate, we’re practicing how to die. The skills you learn in meditation are going to stand you in good stead when life comes to an end and you move on. Now the question is, who are you who is moving on? It’s not a question of whether you’re the person the Buddha addressed. In the same way, who are you who’s meditating? We don’t need to ask that question before we meditate. We just sit down and follow the instructions. And you don’t have to define yourself as to whether you’re an enlightened being trying to remember your enlightenment or an unenlightened being trying to enlighten yourself. Those aren’t the issues when you meditate. The Buddha has you focus on what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing. In the same way, when you approach death, the Buddha doesn’t talk about what dies, what gets reborn, or what goes in between, aside from explaining the process by which it happens, and focusing specifically on what you’re doing. Because what happens at death is very much the same as what happens in the process of distraction while you’re meditating. You have an intention to stay with the breath, and these other thought worlds pop up. And if you’re not careful, you go with them. The popping up of the thought world is like the process of what they call bhava, independent core arising. And then going into the thought world is like birth. So that’s what you’ve got to watch out for. Where do these thought worlds come from? They come from clinging. Clinging comes from craving. In fact, there’s one sutra where the Buddha says that craving is the medium from one life to the next, where it’s the sustenance, the thing that’s clung to as you go from one life to the next. In other words, most people at the moment of death place all their hope in their craving and suddenly find that they can’t stay in this body anymore, the whole thing is falling apart. And there’s no place you can go in the house on fire. You’ve just got to get out. And so this is why many people, when the house is on fire, they jump out the window without even thinking about whether they’re going to be landing or not. And it’s the same when most people die. They just jump. Anything that comes along, they jump for it. So what we’re learning to do here as we meditate is learning how not to jump. There’s another alternative. You don’t have to stay in the burning house, but also you don’t have to jump. At the very least, if you’re not completely awakened, there is one place you can go. There’s one element of space. One of Ajahn Fueng’s students, an old woman, was sitting and meditating one night in the group meditation at one asokana. And this voice came into her ear as she sat down to meditate, “Tonight you’re going to die.” So she thought to herself, “Well, if I’m going to die, I might as well die meditating.” And then she thought of space and suddenly focused on the space element that permeated all this stuff. Space was not on fire. So she hung out in space for a while. And then her focus shifted back to the elements of fire. So she found that the body had gone back to normal. So she hadn’t died. That’s how she lived to tell the story. But she mentioned her experience to a number of Ajahns. She said, “Yeah, if you have no other place to go, go to space. It’s a good, safe place to hang out. Even though it’s still an attachment, it’s still a form of clinging. It’s a lot better than most of the things that come up.” My own experience of almost dying was when I was electrocuted. A lot of images suddenly came up to the mind while I realized that I couldn’t move and I was probably going to die from my own stupidity for not having checked the electricity. Then all of a sudden I remembered, “Hey, I’ve been meditating all this time. I’m going to have to learn how to use my meditation skills. This is what they’re for.” So whatever the vision that came up regarding the fact that I couldn’t say goodbye to my father, my family, regretting the things I hadn’t yet accomplished in my life, I said, “You can’t go there.” So these visions would come and I would just say, “Nope, nope,” and then they would fall away. Then the connection that had me electrocuted was cut, so I didn’t die. I’m here telling you the story. But it’s interesting watching the mind at that point, because the people who saw me being electrocuted said it happened in the snap of a finger. For me, it felt like several minutes. Your mind spins really fast at that point when you realize that the body can’t move, you can’t do anything in this body, and you’re going to have to get out. And it looks for all kinds of alternatives. These alternatives will pop up, and you need the mindfulness not to go with them. So this is why we practice developing mindfulness, developing alertness, so that when distractions occur in the course of the meditation, we know enough how not to fall for them. If it so happens that you’re going to have to be reborn, at least you can choose a good place to go. But it’s also good to develop certain skills that don’t get you pulled into things that look good but are not going to be good. This is one of the reasons why we practice analyzing the body into its thirty-two parts. There’s one tradition that sometimes you hear in the Buddhist world. It’s that the person who is about to be reborn sees his or her parents having sex, gets attracted to one or the other, and then zoop, goes down and gets into the womb. It’s probably one of the reasons why the idea of your parents having sex grosses you out for the rest of your life. So this is why we practice analyzing the body into its thirty-two parts, no matter how attractive the body may be. It’s good to realize that rebirth in the human realm is not all that happy. No matter how attractive it may look on the surface, you’ve got to remember there’s all sorts of ugly stuff lurking beneath. This is one way you can take apart that image that might appear as you’re about to leave the body. It’s also good to reflect on karma, that it’s not all that good. It’s not the fact that just because something appears that you’ve got to go with it. Again, the same lesson you’ve learned in your meditation. Just because a thought comes into your mind doesn’t mean you have to complete the thought or find out where it goes. Just let it go in its vaguely formed condition. The same with these images that are going to pop up at death. You don’t have to get into them just because, say, a bad image appears and you think, “Oh my gosh, all those bad things I did in my life, I really am going to go to hell.” Don’t fall for that thought, because you’ve got good karma as well. This is why it’s important to remember the principle in karma. We have lots of different karmic potentials. We don’t have to go with the bad ones. Try to nourish the good ones. You can do that even at death, if you’ve had practice. Even though the Buddha doesn’t answer the question of what dies and what gets reborn, as he often says, this is an inappropriate question, just as it’s inappropriate to ask, “Well, who’s meditating?” You’ve probably heard that old question, “Well, if there’s no self, who’s meditating?” Remember, the Buddha never said there is no self. He never said there was a self. When he points out the drawbacks of different self-theories, he says, “You look at this and you just don’t see that it’s proper to hold any of those self-theories.” He doesn’t say, “You look at this and you conclude that there is no self.” Those are two very different conclusions. It’s important that you see the distinction. Instead, he has you focus on what you’re doing, the results of what you’re doing, particularly the results in terms of the stress or ease, the pain or pleasure that comes from what you’re doing. The doing is always primary in the Buddhist teaching. If you look at the list of dependent-core arising, the doing, i.e., sankhana, comes up first, and the being, or impava, comes quite a bit later. Doing is primary. Being is secondary. So focus on what you’re doing. Learn how to do what you’re doing well, because the skills you develop here are the ones you’re going to need at the moment of death. You’re not going to need to know the theory of what dies and what gets reborn. But you will have to know how to handle the process skillfully. That’s what we’re working on, these skills. Staying with the breath, suddenly finding yourself someplace up, being able to pull yourself back, and then with time seeing the process of slipping off and realizing you don’t have to go along with it. That’s an important insight in the meditation. While you’re staying right here, you can actually see a mental current flowing out of the mind. In the past, you’ve always flowed along with the current. But if you’re able to stay still while the current flows, you see the current doesn’t go very far, if you’re not right along with it. Or as the Chan Mon would say, you’re not singing along with it. So it’s always a question of what you’re doing, not a question of who you are. There’s that one sutta when the Buddha says, when you really focus on things as they’re rising and passing away, you get to the point where the notion of their existence doesn’t occur to you. As you see them arise, the notion of their non-existence doesn’t occur to you. Those concepts he has you put aside. But you hold on to these concepts of realizing that your actions have results, and you can learn how to do the actions skillfully. The skills you develop here are going to see you through all kinds of difficulties in life, and they’re going to see you through death. So focus on mastering them well. Instead of having to willingly place your hope and craving, you can place your hope on the skills that come from being mindful, alert, being knowledgeable, seeing things in terms of the Four Noble Truths. In other words, putting aside the ignorance that is so troublemaking, that causes all the problems to begin with. As meditators, we may be ignorant of other things, but as long as you’re not ignorant of the Four Noble Truths, i.e., as long as you can see your experience in terms of these Four Noble Truths, you know all you need to know.

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