Heedful of Death

August 30, 2009

Years back, there was a Broadway musical, A Hundred and Ten Degrees in the Shade, which was about the miserable heat that pioneers had to go through as they moved into the Midwest. Today, it’s A Hundred and Twelve in the Shade. It’s on days like this when you start wishing your time away. That’s when you’ve got to stop and think, “Okay, this is your opportunity to practice.” You don’t know how much longer you’ll have. So even on days like this, you’ve got to take advantage of the opportunity. At least you’re alive. You can still focus on the breath, you can still focus on whatever your topic of meditation might be. And appreciate the fact that you still have a breath coming in and going out that you can focus on, that you can use to train the mind. Think about the things that are still bearable, still tolerable, in spite of the heat. There are cooler parts of the body, the water element in the body. You can focus on that wherever you find a cooler sensation. Or focus on the breath. Think of the breath surrounding the body. You get really into the breath and you start forgetting about the heat. Then you realize the opportunities for practice are still here, and you want to make the most of them. Because if you don’t make the most of them, when your time is up, you’ll regret all that wasted time that you could have developed the skills that would really hold you in good stead as you’re facing the pains of aging, the pains of illness. The pains of death. We don’t like to think about death, but the Buddha says mindfulness of death or recollection of death leads to the deathless. So when he has you think about death, it’s not to get depressed or discouraged. It’s actually to encourage you to realize there’s work to be done. And it’s only when you do the work that you can reach the deathless. There’s that old verse in the Dhammapada, “Heedfulness is the path to the deathless. Heedlessness is the path to death. The heedful never die. The heedless are as if already dead.” If you’re sitting in a hot afternoon and thinking about just when will this time pass really quickly so we can get through it, it’s like you’re dead. You’re not taking advantage of the opportunity you have right here, right now, to develop some really important qualities of mind. So always keep this point in mind as you find yourself trying to rush through certain parts of the day. You want to make the most of each moment. And that doesn’t mean squeezing as much pleasure out of the moment as you can, but it means using the opportunity to develop good qualities of the mind. One of the customs of the noble ones is to delight in developing, to delight in abandoning. You develop mindfulness, you develop heedfulness, you develop skillfulness. That’s good use of your time. You abandon sensual desire, ill will, torpor and lethargy, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty. That’s good use of your time. That’s one of the worst things that hits at the moment of death, is a sense of regret and all those opportunities you had to do good and you didn’t take advantage of. So your guarantee against that is that you do make the most of your time, even when it’s difficult, even when there’s hardship. You don’t want your goodness to depend on nice conditions. You want it to be there despite difficult conditions, something that you can depend on regardless of what the weather’s like, what other people are like, what happens to society. This is your real protection. It’s the solidity of the mind that makes the mind dependable. And as you keep digging deeper and deeper in the meditation, there does come a point where you find the opening to the deathless. But it’s only through this ability to dig regardless of the conditions. That’s why the Buddha said, “Mindfulness of death leads to the deathless.” People who don’t like to think about death are the ones who are dying all the time. I know there are some people who are afraid that if they think about death too much, it’s like putting a hex on themselves. But that’s not the case at all. It’s the people who are constantly aware of the possibility of death. And realize that you really have to prepare for it. And you can prepare for it. There’s a skill to dying. Because when that moment comes, you suddenly find you can’t stay in the body. And the mind will go with a particular mood or actually have an actual vision. It’s like a dream comes up. Not just one, many will come. And one of the skills we learn in meditation, of course, is to say no to vagrant thoughts that come through the mind. And that’ll be a good habit to have, the ability to step back from a thought and not go jumping into it. So you can step back and say, “I don’t have to go there,” especially if it’s a thought of regret, a thought of remorse. Fear, surprise. It’s good not to be surprised by death when it comes. Because if there’s too much sense of surprise, then there’s also going to be the feeling, “Well, so soon, it’s not right. I have so much more life to live.” Well, no, you don’t at that point. “I should have more life.” Well, what kind of “should” is that? So you have to put that in your mind. Put those thoughts aside and focus on, “The time has come. It’s time to do it right. Let’s show what we’ve learned from the meditation.” That attitude will see you through. And remember, you’ve got these skills you’ve developed as a meditator. Those are the skills you need at that point. And if you’re really skillful, you don’t have to come back. But at the very least, you want to be able to come back in a situation where you can continue to practice. You think about the situation we have now, where we can practice. The conditions may not be totally ideal, but they’re good. They’re sufficient. There are a lot of people who don’t have these kinds of conditions. That’s because they didn’t prepare them. And we do prepare them. We prepare our next life with our actions now. As the Buddha said, when you go to the next life, your good actions are there to receive you, like relatives receiving a long-lost relative who’s finally come home. Even though you’re going to a strange new place, your good actions make it feel like coming home. Those are nothing but bad actions or bad mental qualities to receive you. It’s not like coming home at all. It’s going to a totally strange place where nobody’s friendly. So at the very least, you want to develop the qualities that do create a good place to come back home to. Or better yet, get the mind into a strong position where it doesn’t have to go anywhere at that point. It doesn’t feel the need to latch on to anything. But that can be done only as you develop good qualities now. So appreciate the opportunity you have to do things now. Each time you breathe in, breathe out. As the Buddha said, the heedful person is one who says, “May I live for one more breath so I can practice the teachings. I can accomplish a lot.” That’s what it means to be heedful. Regard each breath as an opportunity to practice, an opportunity to develop the mind. Whether it’s sitting here meditating, whether it’s working around the monastery, or it’s doing good in other ways. Each breath is going to be expended anyhow, so you might as well expend it in something good, something worthwhile, something of solid value. As the Buddha said, all skillfulness comes from heedfulness. That’s an important teaching. Heedfulness is the root of all skillful behavior. Notice what he’s not saying. He’s not saying that our good behavior comes from our natural goodness, or our Buddha nature, or our innate worthwhile qualities, or innate nature. The Buddha doesn’t assume an innate nature at all. They’re just qualities that come and go in the mind. Sometimes they’re good, sometimes they’re not. But heedfulness is the quality that makes you realize, “Okay, I’ve got to work on developing the good qualities and abandoning the unskillful ones right now.” You realize you do have the choice, and the choice makes a difference. So you want to make sure you make the right choice right now, right now, every right now. That’s how skillfulness gets developed in the mind. If you assume that goodness is innate to you, you’re not going to have that sense of urgency. You get complacent. You start seeing your skillful qualities run out on you. Then what do you do? Skillful qualities have to be nurtured, as long as you haven’t reached that point of stream-entry, actually seeing the deathless. In your own awareness, when they say “touching the deathless” with your body. As long as you haven’t had that experience, you’re still uncertain. Your mind is uncertain. Your future is uncertain. The Buddha doesn’t make any guarantees. It’s only with stream-entry that he starts guaranteeing. You’ve reached that foothold. You’ve finally reached the point where your feet can reach the bottom of the river. You’re so much less likely to be swept away. At some point, you’re guaranteed to get up on the bank, where you’re totally free from all the dangers that the river can sweep down at you. All the underwater logs that could hit you in the ribcage, all the weird animals, all the whirlpools, all the other things that a river can do to you. When you’ve reached that point, where your feet reach the bottom of the bank, the bottom of the river, you’re right next to the shore. Then you’ve reached a great deal of safety. But until that point, there are no guarantees. Even with people who’ve reached stream-entry, the Buddha says, “You’ve got to be heedful.” Because even though the stream-enterer is guaranteed no more than seven lifetimes and nothing lower than the human realm, still, the human realm can be pretty miserable. Seven lifetimes can contain a lot of stress and suffering. So, as the Buddha said, just as the footprint of the elephant can contain all the other footprints of all the other animals, in the same way heedfulness contains all other skillful qualities within it. So this is why we think about death. It’s to spark our heedfulness, so we can get on the path to the deathless. You want to be the sort of person who, by thinking about death, goes beyond death. Otherwise, if you refuse to think about death, you’re just going to keep on dying over and over and over again. So it’s up to you to choose which path you’re going to be on. Are you going to be the sort of person who never dies or the sort of person who’s already dead? You do have the choice. And everything depends on those choices that you make. It’s right here in our choices in the present moment. That’s where recollection of death keeps our awareness focused. Each breath we have the opportunity to practice. Each breath we have the opportunity to practice the Buddha’s teachings and to accomplish a great deal.

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