Prepare to Die

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One of the saddest things in our society is the way we treat aging, illness, and death. More specifically, the way we treat people who are old, people who are sick, and people who are dying. We tend to hide them away. We don’t really prepare them, which means we don’t really prepare ourselves for how to handle these things. You’d think this would be the number one issue in any kind of education. When we learn geography, it’s not really certain that we’re going to have much use for geography or all the various required courses. We don’t really know how much different people are going to need those particular courses. We do know that everybody’s going to face the problems of aging, illness, and death and separation from the people they love. This is why the Buddha has us reflect on these things every day. I’m subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to being separated from all that is dear and appealing to me. And not only me, everybody, no matter where—lay or ordained man, woman, or child—is subject to these things. So how do we prepare? Part of the preparation is in that fifth contemplation, “I’m the owner of my actions, heir to my actions.” We really can make a difference through the way we act, how we’re going to experience aging, illness, and death, what skills we’re going to bring to those processes as they occur. Probably one of the reasons we don’t like to think about these topics is that, for most people, they don’t really think they can prepare. What do you do? If you’re going to die, you’re going to die. If you’re sick, well, you can get medicine. And if the medicine works, you’re fine. If the medicine doesn’t work, well, what can you do? That’s the attitude most people have, which is why they don’t think about these things, why they don’t prepare. But from the Buddha’s point of view, there’s a lot you can do to prepare. You can get your mind in really good shape. You can develop qualities of mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment. These things really will hold you in good stead. You know, a lot of the techniques we’re practicing as we meditate are just this technique of focusing the mind on one thing and learning how to let go of everything else. That’s going to be a really useful technique, a really useful approach, as the time of death approaches. But you can’t save everything for just the technique you’re going to use then. You have to look at the way you live your life leading up to those processes. Because the way you live has a lot to do with the way you’re going to die, a lot to do with the way you’re going to age, a lot to do with the way you approach illness. There’s one sutra that says, the Buddha talks about four things that make people fear death. And they’re all things you can do something about. And there are other things as well that are mentioned here and there in the texts. One is just being worried about other people. There’s a sutra where there’s a man who’s really sick, and his wife comes to him and says, “The Buddha says the worst thing you can do when you’re dying is to be worried.” So don’t worry about me, don’t worry about the children. I can take care of myself, I have enough skills that I can support myself, my practice in the Dhamma is solid enough that I’m not going to waver. So you don’t have to worry about me. So when you know somebody who’s dying or someone who’s ill, that’s one way you can reassure them, or one thing you should do to reassure them. So it’s nothing that they have to worry about. You can really focus their attention on what they’re doing, how they’re going to go through the process of death and coming out in rebirth on the other side. But the things we fear have to do with two kinds of attachments and two kinds of uncertainty. The attachments have to do with attachments to the body and attachment to sensual pleasure. This is why renunciation is such an important part of the practice. Because if you’re attached to your body, attached to your sensual pleasures, you can’t think of any well-being that can come without those things. The prospect of death is really scary, because you know at death you have to leave this body. And our culture is such that it really fosters attachment to the body. There are a lot of companies out there that make a lot of money because we’re attached to our bodies. And so they encourage this. But if you don’t want to be afraid of death, then the first thing you’ve got to look at is this attachment to your body. Why are you attached to this lump of all these things in here? Well, probably it’s because it’s all you know as a source for happiness. So one way around that is to find a source for happiness. Find other sources of happiness, like learning to be concentrated, learning to develop the ease and well-being that come when the mind is centered. I once heard someone say that you shouldn’t focus on the breath because after all, at death, you’re going to have to leave the breath, and then where are you going to be? Well, we focus on the breath not to get the breath. It’s because the breath leads us into the mind. It’s the closest physical process there is to the mind. And as you focus more and more on the breath, the breath gets more and more still. The state of awareness, just in and of itself, becomes more and more clear. And when that’s solid enough, then you can switch your focus there. And you realize there’s a sense of intense well-being that can come when the mind is really focused, settled in. Then you can look at the body and see, well, what is there in the body that’s really worth getting attached to? This is why we have the contemplation of the thirty-two parts. Let’s go down the list. Which one of those parts would you really like to claim as you or yours, if you were just to take it out? Look at what happens in ordinary, everyday life. Your hairs fall out. You clip off your nails. You don’t want to keep the nails. You don’t want to sweep it away. The hair falls out. You don’t want to sweep it away. John Foong used to complain about me when I cleaned his hut. He said, “You leave hairs all over the place.” So I’d have to go back and clean it again. Of course, that didn’t help, because I’d leave more hairs. But it was a good contemplation. I told him one time, “Why don’t you go back and clean it again?” He said, “Well, I can’t help it. I was born this way.” He said, “No, there was some previous lifetime when you wanted this. Now you’ve got it.” These are the drawbacks that come with it. But any part of the body that falls off. If a tooth falls out, you have to get rid of it. Skin scraps off, you have to get rid of that. And all things that come out of the body, you’ve got to get rid of them really fast. So what is it that you really want to hold on to? What is it that’s so magical and wonderful about this? And this is not to make you feel bad about your body, that your body is worse than other people. That’s an unhealthy negative body image. The healthy negative body image is to realize that there’s really nothing here that’s worth getting all worked up about—nobody in the world. There’s a body that’s any different from yours. So it’s good to contemplate this, to see exactly where is there this attachment here, and why it’s there, and what you can do to get a sense that you could really be okay without the body. Because there are states of concentration that don’t have to depend on the body at all. There are states of awareness. That’s number four on the list, so let’s save that for a minute. Number two on the list is attachment to sensual pleasures. As I said earlier, this is why we practice renunciation—to get the mind used to the body, not having any sensual pleasures to pick up on at any old time. It’s so easy nowadays. You get bored, you can find a movie, get a video, listen to music, and the entertainment world is all over the place. There’s good food. You look in the magazines, there’s good art. There’s all these wonderful things you can buy to enhance your meditation experience. It’s all things, things, things. So it’s good to have a practice that cuts those things off. You don’t eat afternoon, that cuts off the mouth. You don’t watch shows, that cuts off the eyes. You don’t listen to music, that cuts off the ears. You don’t wear cosmetics, that cuts off the ears. You don’t lie in a comfortable bed, that cuts off the body. In other words, you place restraints on these things, the types of pleasures you’re going to typically look for, which forces you to look into the skills and the mind so that you can still have a sense of ease and well-being without these things. A lot of people look at all the rules that the monks live by and say, “Oh my gosh, all these restrictions. Don’t you go crazy?” And you say, “Well, no.” You find that you actually have other resources inside for developing happiness, and this is important. Restraint is an essential part of the practice. It’s like putting up a dam across the river. You don’t know how strong the river is until you put the dam across. And then what are you going to do with all that water? Well, you find other uses for it. You can irrigate crops, you can find ways of using those dammed-up energies so that they don’t just keep flowing away, flowing away, flowing away to no purpose at all. So it’s an important practice that you’re not so attached to sensual pleasures, that you’ve got alternative ways of finding happiness inside. It’s a useful skill to have now, and it’s especially useful when you face the prospect of having to abandon your sensual pleasures totally. So those are the two kinds of attachments that make us afraid of death. And this is how the Buddha helps us pry ourselves loose from those attachments. As for the forms of death, one is that sense of insecurity. You know you’ve done things wrong, and there’s a possibility that after death you’re going to be punished for them. And the second one is not necessarily that there’s somebody up there keeping records and they’re going to catch you and say, “Hey, look, you did this wrong, you did that wrong, and we’ve got these laws and we’re going to carry you off and punish you.” It’s simply the fact of action. You do something unskillful and it’s going to come back in an unpleasant way. And for a lot of us, we don’t know this for sure, but there’s always the possibility that you can start thinking about things that you did in the past where you harmed other people. And there’s always that uncertainty. I’ve noticed that when people hear the teaching on karma for the first time, that’s the first thing they think about. “Oh my gosh, I’ve got all these horrible things I did in the past and I can’t get away with them.” They immediately dislike the teaching. But the way we can get around that, of course, is to make sure that we don’t harm others. If there are people we’ve harmed in the past, the Buddha says, develop thoughts of goodwill for them. Keep them in mind so that you don’t want to harm other people. Because that’s the next step, of course, is to develop thoughts of goodwill for everybody. Make up your mind that whatever harmful things they did in the past, you’re not going to do them again. You’re going to exercise restraint. This is a different kind of restraint. Not so much restraint in how you look at things and how you listen to things, but also restraint in what you do, what you say, what you think. So you can look back on your life and say, “Oh, there’s nobody I’ve really harmed. Or even when I did harm somebody, I learned from it. I just didn’t keep doing it thoughtlessly.” It helps to allay a lot of fears. The other uncertainty, of course, is, is there a deathless? Is there something that survives death? The Buddha said quite definitely that there is. We have an awareness that is not harmed by death. The more you develop that sense of this awareness inside, the stronger position you’re going to be in. And particularly when you reach that level where you’ve reached something that’s beyond time, beyond space, you realize that the process of death is something that happens in time and space. But there’s also an awareness that’s not in time and space. Death can’t touch that. When you’ve reached that point in your practice, then you have no doubts, as the Buddha said, no doubts about the true Dhamma. You’ve got your own inner evidence that the Buddha knew what he was talking about. When you train the mind, when you develop virtue, concentration, and discernment, they can lead to release. They don’t cause that dimension to exist. An image in one of the texts is that it’s like a road that goes to a mountain. The road doesn’t cause the mountain. The fact that we’re following the road doesn’t cause the mountain to be. But the fact that we follow the road does let us get there. This path of practice we have doesn’t cause the unconditioned, because nothing could cause the unconditioned by definition. But it is possible to lead us there, to the edge, to the point where we can touch that with the body, i.e., we touch it with our total awareness. When you’ve seen that, when you’ve known that for yourself, that ends your fear of death. So on the one hand, we exercise restraint, cut off all the unskillful things we do in search of sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, all the unskillful things we tend to do when we’re thoughtless of other people. We exercise restraint whenever we find ourselves attached to the body. We remind ourselves, “What is really there?” We like to think of ourselves as attractive, but as the Buddha says, the more you are concerned about your attractiveness, the more you find yourself tied down. The more you find other things attractive, the more you’re tied down to them. So in the process of overcoming our fear of death, we also find that we can liberate ourselves from all the restrictions that we tend to place on the body and the mind, particularly the restrictions we place on the mind. So here’s the paradox. The more you exercise restraint, the more unrestricted the mind becomes. And that, ultimately, is what the teaching is all about. It’s freedom, freedom, freedom. Freedom from defilement, freedom from the influence of the khandas. The mind is free from every form of restriction, every form of limitation that’s placed on it by space and time. Free from fear, free from attachment. This is why the Buddha said that when you contemplate death, it doesn’t just lead to more depression. It doesn’t make you morose. You contemplate death in the correct way. It leads to the deathless. You realize there are certain things you’ve got to do, you’ve got to prepare for. And as you develop those skills in the mind, you really do touch something there, a dimension there, that doesn’t die. That’s why contemplation of death is not a depressing, or discouraging thought. It’s the basis for heedfulness. Heedfulness is the basis for skillfulness. Skillfulness is the basis for release. So learn to think about death in this way, and you’ll find that you really benefit. (crickets chirping)

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