Matters of Life & Death

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The passage that we frequently chant, “I’m subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death,” the Thai translation is interesting. It says, “Aging is normal. Illness is normal. Death is normal.” And yet we act as if these things were not normal, that they break into our regular lives and don’t have a right to be there. They get in the way of what we want out of life. They get in the way of our plans and our expectations. And if that’s our attitude, we’re going to suffer a lot when these things come, as they inevitably will, because they are normal. So the most important training we can take on is the training that teaches us how to face aging without suffering, how to face illness without suffering, how to face death without suffering. We’re going to keep these things in mind without getting morbid, without getting depressed, but at the same time being very honestly with ourselves. Be aware that these really are major dangers in our lives. The commentary defines the word bhikkhu, or monk, as someone who sees danger. Whether you’re actually ordained or not, the important thing is that you actually see the dangers in life and you prepare for them. It’s as if someone were going to go down to the South Pole and not prepare for the cold. That’s the way most of us live our lives. “Whoops, here comes aging. Whoops, here comes illness. Oh my gosh, here comes death.” And what’s really surprising is that we’re surprised by these things. Part of it is our culture that wants to make us forget them. And part of it is just plain old human nature. That’s the way it is around the world. Even in Buddhist cultures, people can get very oblivious to the fact that they’re going to grow ill, age, grow ill, and die. But at least they have a handle on it, much more than we tend to have here in the West. So it’s important that we think about these things and learn how to think about them, that they can be prepared for, and that there’s a skillful way of handling them. An important part of this is not getting intoxicated with youth, with health, and with life. In other words, where we have these strengths, we remind ourselves that they’re not going to last forever. We’ve got to learn how to use them wisely. Like that passage in The Onion, the counterpoint to the old man writing an article saying that youth is wasted on the young, and the young person writing a response saying that prescription drugs are wasted on the old. And it’s really deluded and really intoxicated, literally. That’s the second idea. And of course, there’s the Athenian Hawthorne story about the old people who complained about how, gee, if they only had their youth back again, they wouldn’t have wasted it with running around doing frivolous things. And then they get this magic elixir that actually returns their youth to them. And of course, they go back and behave in the same old stupid way they were when they were young. That’s the way most of us are. Age doesn’t automatically bring wisdom. But at the same time, youth doesn’t automatically bring foolishness. We can use our youth, to the extent that we still have it, to devote to the practice. The Buddha has a passage where he talks about future dangers. When you reflect on the fact that you are now young, you’re now strong, healthy, and you’re still alive, the time will come when these strengths will pass. And so you want to develop that quality of mind that will serve you as a refuge when you are old, when you are ill, when you’re dying. This is why, when we meditate, we put so much emphasis on developing mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. Mindfulness is not just being aware. It’s keeping certain things in mind, especially keeping in mind the idea that you really have to develop skillful qualities if you want to be safe. The Buddha talks about the Self being its own refuge. You have to make yourself into a refuge and how to build on the strengths that you’ve got and consolidate them. And so when unskillful qualities come up in the mind, you don’t just sit there and watch them or indulge in them or play around with them. You’ve got to realize, “Okay, this is a danger. This could get me in real trouble if I give into it. Because if I’m used to giving in to my unskillful qualities, when the time comes when I can’t afford that, what am I going to do?” When pain comes, the restrictions of aging, the pain of illness, the fear of death, the fear of being upset about that, how are you going to keep from getting upset about that? One is to remind yourself that the pain may be in the body, but it doesn’t have to be in the mind. The restrictions may be in the body, but the mind doesn’t have to be restricted. There are areas in which the mind can find true happiness. You find it within. This is what the concentration provides, which is why it’s not a way of being. It’s a waste of time. When you do find pleasure in the concentration, you learn how to maintain it. It’s a balancing act, learning how to stay there and not disturb it. It’s like you find yourself floating. It feels just right. There’s a weightlessness, a lightness to the body, a lightness to the mind. And the mind can calm down. The mind can say, “Oh my gosh, this is wonderful. How do I keep this going? Isn’t this great?” Or, “Okay, what’s next?” And either way, you disturb the balance. It’s a very precise balance, and you have to learn how to just be with it with only a minimum amount of comment. Just enough to remind yourself to stay with this, stay with this, learn how to keep it going. Notice the slightest little disturbance that would knock it out of balance and just drop it. Whatever thought comes into the mind that disturbs that balance, just drop it, drop it, drop it. This is where you have to learn how to strip all the velcro off of your thoughts so they don’t stick, they don’t grab you. A thought can come and you’re fine. If it doesn’t grab you, it can just go right past you, and it’s not going to disturb the balance. That’s the kind of solidity you want in your concentration. And it takes practice. So it’s not a waste of time to hang out in those pleasurable states. Notice what the breath is like when it’s really pleasurable. There’ll be a sense of fullness, a sense of ease in the breathing. Note that fact. There’ll be a sense that you really don’t have to do that much to the breath after all. Once you get that sense of the right touch, the light touch, that keeps you balanced, so that even though there may be pains in different parts of the body, you don’t have to focus on them, you can stay with that sense of ease, that sense of easiness that comes when everything’s balanced. And you begin to realize that it’ll depend less and less and less on how things are going in the body. In the beginning, it’s like practicing a musical instrument. You’ve got to find a really quiet place where conditions are ideal so you don’t get distracted. But if you want to perform, you have to be able to perform in an auditorium where there are lots of people, lots of distractions. And of course, your self-consciousness suddenly comes to the fore. You have to learn how to put that aside, so you’re just there with the music. In the same way, you’ve just got to be here with a sense of ease, despite other sensations in the body, despite things happening around you. It’s a skill that you’ve got to develop. And in developing this skill, you also develop your discernment, knowing what you should focus on, what you should let go. And the meditation is a practice in learning how to let go, let go, let go, and the different thoughts that come up, the different concerns that come up. The chatter in the mind that gets worried about you. You sit here and your circulation gets cut off in your legs. Is that going to paralyze your legs? Well, no, you learn it doesn’t. And all the other worries that come up. Sometimes the worry is that if you find the breath getting really refined, it seems like it’s going to stop. So there’s that fear. What happens if the breath stops? Well, you’re not going to die. In the Buddha’s instructions on breath meditation, you learn how to calm bodily fabrication, which is the in-and-out breath, and you calm the mental fabrications, which are perceptions and feelings. And these perceptions are going to be a big thing you’ve got to learn how to deal with. As you grow older, there will be the perception of getting older. When you’re sick, there’s a perception of illness. And you begin to realize that just carrying those perceptions around is a real burden. If you have practice in the meditation, you learn that you can put aside those perceptions. Any perception that comes up that’s going to burden the mind and not be used for any useful purpose, you can learn how to put it down, put it down, put it down. Let it go. Let it pass. And you begin to realize that there’s a burden. You begin to realize that this sense of balance you have in the mind, which seems very fragile in the beginning and seems almost so light that you can’t really grab onto it, but it’s there. You learn how to maintain that balance without grabbing. That’s something that’s going to be your mainstay. That’s going to be your nourishment. And as the body begins to fall apart, you suffer aging. You suffer illness, death, separation. You still have this to come back to. And you find that it’s sustaining. In the beginning, it doesn’t seem like much, because it’s still just getting started. But as you stick with it, you find it really does provide you with respite. It provides you with a place you can rest, gather your strength. It becomes what they call your vihara dhamma, the home for the mind. Because after all, this body that you’re living in right now can’t be your home forever. We get used to it, thinking, “This is me. This is mine.” But there will come a time when you get tired of just carrying it around. A couple of weeks back, during the Saturday morning session, I was in the home. One of the members of the group commented that she was going to be turning 80 next week. She was beginning to contemplate the end of her life. Someone else said, “Oh no, my mother’s lived to be past 100. You could live another 20 years.” The woman who was going to be celebrating her 80th birthday said, “Don’t put a curse on me. I don’t want to live that long.” You just find that the body gets less and less responsive. It becomes more and more of a burden. This happens to all of us. It creeps up on us. The body doesn’t ask permission. It just starts falling apart here and falling apart there. You think, “Well, maybe if I eat a special diet and exercise a special way, I can keep it going.” And you can push against the tendency to some extent, but then the body just decides some other way to fail you. You have to realize that aging is normal. It’s not a failing. Illness is normal. It’s not a failing. Death, when it comes, is not a failing. It’s normal. And if you can keep your own mind normal in the face of that, with this balance, with this sense of precision in knowing what to focus on, what to allow yourself to think, what to allow yourself to put aside, that skill is going to be your refuge and carry you not only through the aging but also through the whole dying process. And if you’re really skilled, you won’t have to come after it. It’ll just be the end. The end of what? It’s not the end of you. Well, your sense of you will go, but it won’t be the end of awareness. It’ll be the end of space and time, but there’s still an awareness there. But for most of us, there will be something the mind will latch onto. Train it. As the Buddha said, it’ll latch onto craving. That’s what will sustain it from one birth to the next, from one life to the next. You’ve just got to learn how to look at your cravings and watch out for the ones that are unskillful, and at the very least, foster the ones that are skillful. Learn how to recognize them, learn how to strengthen them. So you have to grab onto something, grab onto something skillful. You have to have the determination that you want to go someplace where you can practice, where you hear the Dhamma and have an opportunity to practice the Dhamma. So what this means is you have to train the mind how to navigate some very narrow passages. It’s like a ship that has to go through a very narrow strait. So you try to bring more skill, perception, alertness to how to bring the mind to this balance, which is very light, but as you stick with it, it gets stronger and stronger. So you can navigate all the dangers, all the rocks and whirlpools and everything. And come through with ease. There are people who refuse to think about aging, illness, and death. They think, “Well, when it comes, it’s just going to come. There’s nothing you can do. Maybe they can shoot me full of drugs. I won’t have to suffer.” When you’re in a drugged state, you can’t make wise choices. The fact of the matter is, you can handle these things skillfully, and you need as much mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment as you can muster. This is why they say, and it’s a commonplace in Thailand, that when you practice meditation, you’re practicing not only how to live, but also how to die, how to face up with all the normal things in life. And learn how to handle them with finesse.

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