Preparing for Aging, Illness & Death

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The chan we had just now—I’m subject to aging, I’m subject to illness, I’m subject to death, I’m subject to separation—these are all things we don’t like to think about. And yet, if we don’t think about them, it doesn’t mean they go away. It means that we’re not prepared for them when they come. This is an essential feature of heedfulness, that we think about the dangers that are lying in wait. And we see them all around us. As the Buddha said, some people are like the horse that all you have to do is whisper “whip” in its ear, and it obeys. Others actually have to see the whip. Others have to be touched by the whip. Others have to have the whip go into the skin. Others have to have the whip go all the way to the bone before they obey. In the same way, some of us, we all know that aging happens, illness happens, death happens, separation happens. These things happen all over the world to everybody, for that exception. Some people prepare, some people don’t. And it’s a sign of the heedful person, the one who only needs to hear about the whip or see the whip. So when you see other people growing old, growing ill, when they die, you remind yourself that you’ve got to prepare for these things. They’re inevitable. If aging doesn’t happen to you, that means you’re going to die first. Neither choice is that attractive. But it is possible to prepare. This is one of the reasons most people don’t prepare. They don’t think that you can do anything about them, so you just forget about them and go about your days. And then when these things hit, then you’re just sort of left in your own resources. But it is possible to prepare. It is possible to find a happiness that’s not subject to aging, not subject to illness, not subject to death. And when you’ve found that, then you’re not afraid of these things because you realize you’ve got something that they can’t touch, something that lies beyond their power. The Buddha once said that this was his motivation in looking for awakening to begin with. He said that he was subject to these dangers. And the dangers are written into that other chant we did just now. Aging is an aspect of inconstancy or impermanence. Illness is an aspect of suffering. And death is the ultimate teaching and not self. In other words, the things you have, your material belongings, your status, the praise you get from people, these things are things you have to leave behind. You can’t take them with you as you go. There is one thing you can take with you, and there’s one thing that serves you in good stead as you’re still alive. And those are your actions. The whole purpose of this contemplation is to remind yourself that you can make a difference through your actions. Even if you don’t reach the deathless, you still can strengthen the mind’s mindfulness, its alertness, its discernment, all the qualities you’re going to need when pain comes, when you find that the body is not able to do the things it used to do, that sudden surprise that comes. “I used to be able to walk up this set of stairs without problems. I used to be able to lift these things without problems.” You can’t do it anymore. The body just doesn’t cooperate. And it didn’t tell you ahead of time. It didn’t send a message saying, “In five days’ time, this is going to happen.” You just find these capabilities you had just falling away, falling away. But if you develop the mindfulness and alertness, one, to be prepared for these things, and two, to find that inner sense of refuge, then when these qualities go, you say, “Well, that’s the way it is. It was in the fine print. I didn’t look at the fine print when I signed up, but I’ve known for a long time that the fine print is there.” Then you prepare yourself by looking inside for what has meaning and value in life. And this is not just for your own good. It’s for your ability to deal with other people who are facing aging, illness, and death as well. If you’re afraid of death, then you don’t want to be around people who are dying. If you’re afraid of aging, you see your relatives who used to be strong and now they’re not so strong anymore. You find yourself avoiding them out of fear. And this doesn’t help them at all. It just leaves them more abandoned. So this is why overcoming your fear of these things is not just a gift to yourself, but it’s a gift to the people around you. The Buddha talks about monks nursing one another. An important quality of being a nurse is that you’re not afraid of things that happen to an ill person. You’re not disgusted by the signs of illness. You’re not disgusted by the things you have to clean up, the things that the body produces that are really unattractive. The same principle applies at large in helping people who are growing old, helping people who are ill, helping people who are dying. You can’t be afraid of these things. The less fear you have around these things, the more useful you are. There’s a common perception that the Buddhist teachings are selfish, that you’re doing this just so that you can be okay or you can find your personal happiness. But as the Buddha points out again and again, the happiness you find through the practice doesn’t have clear boundaries. What boundaries are there? Porous. None of us can find the deathless for somebody else. You can’t hand it over to somebody who’s dying or somebody who’s ill. But in having found it yourself, you’re in a much better position to see what they need and to help them along the path. Even if they’re not capable of going all the way or taking any consciously Buddhist steps on the path, you can speak in ways that remind them of the good they’ve done in the past. Not so that they get sentimental about their past pleasures, but reminding themselves of the good actions they’ve done in the past. That’s because that bores you up. Otherwise, there’s a tendency in the mind, when you’re suffering from aging, illness, and death, to see this as a punishment for your past actions or some sort of great injustice. Neither attitude helps. You just have to keep reminding people that this is the way life is. But you can buoy up your mind by reminding yourself that you have done good in the past. This is especially helpful at the moment of death. Sometimes some very scary images occur to the mind at that point. If the mind has a lot of guilty conscience over some issues, you say, “Oh my gosh, here it is. What they said was right. You’re going to go to hell.” Then you just sort of surrender yourself to that image, which is not healthy at all. You develop the mindfulness and alertness to watch the images arise in the mind. But you don’t have to go with them. This is one of the skills. We develop it as we meditate. You’re sitting here with your breath, and all kinds of images are going to come. All kinds of verbal ideas are going to come through the mind. Different sensations are going to come through the body. But you don’t want them to distract you. It’s an important skill to develop that these things can arise, but just let them pass. Let them pass. Otherwise, you’re the sort of person who’s standing at a bus stop, a bus stop. You just get on the bus without looking at the number on the front of the bus. Where is this bus going? Or you go down to the train station and just hop on any train that’s leaving the station. We know that it’s stupid to do that in real life, but the way the mind runs is even stupider than that. It doesn’t even wait for the trains. It creates its own trains and then goes riding off without really asking, “Where does this train lead?” And you know what it’s like with a train of thought. Even at the beginning, it may seem that it’s going to go to New York City, but you suddenly find that it’s heading off to Detroit. This talk will not play well in Detroit. You suddenly find yourself dumped off at the side of the railroad track someplace. Then you get the next train. This train takes you someplace even worse. It just keeps going worse and worse and worse. So as a meditator, you’ve got to learn this. The important first skill is that you don’t go with anything that else comes along that’s contrary to your original intention. This is how you develop your mindfulness, how you develop your alertness, how you develop the ardency that you need on the practice. As soon as you catch yourself on one of those trains, you just jump off. Unfortunately, trains of thought aren’t going at a speed where you’re going to hurt yourself by jumping off. And you find yourself back at the breath. And as a reward to yourself for coming back, you tell yourself, “What would be one really good, special breath right now that would feel really good deep down inside?” And when you’ve found something feels really good, there’s no need to stop breathing in that way. As long as it feels good, keep it up. If it doesn’t feel good, if after a while you get tired of that kind of breathing, you can change. This is what keeps the breath interesting, helps keep you here. You develop a sense of interest, a sense of desire to see what the breath energy can do for the body, the different ways you breathe, the effect they have on the body, the effect they have on the mind. This way you develop important skills. When you’ve developed these skills, then you can help other people. You find someone harassing you by thoughts of the past. You help direct their attention to things that are more helpful. And then you keep reminding them. There was an old man who was dying at the monastery back in Riong years back. And we hadn’t been able to get any painkillers for him. He had cancer in the jaw. But he’d been meditating bhutto bhutto for a couple years. And so he had his daughter whisper into his ear when she saw that he seemed to be affected by the pain. His head would sort of go back and forth over his pillow. So he was trying to get away from the pain. She’d whisper bhutto bhutto into his ear, and he’d stop and be able to maintain it for an hour or two. And then he’d start moving again. So she’d whisper in his ear again, and he’d stop again. This teaches you two lessons. One is that it shows you how important it is to train the mind now, while you’ve got the opportunity, while your faculties are still good. So when the time comes and you’re trying to meditate as you’re facing aging, illness, and death, you’ve got a skill to fall back on. But keep in mind that you can also help other people who are approaching the end. Keep reminding them of the good things they’ve done. Something that gets their mind off the fact that there’s something they may be afraid of in the process of dying. Focus them on the good things, and this way you can actually be of help. Because this is another thing that causes us to stay away from people who really need our help, because we don’t really know how to help them. Once you’ve developed the skills in the mind, you’ve learned the ins and outs of how the mind plays tricks on itself, how it tends to forget, how it tends to focus on things that are unhelpful. And you’ve learned the skills in how to not fall into those traps. Then you can share that knowledge with other people, and it’s really helpful. And so this is why learning how to overcome your own fear of aging, illness, and death makes you a more helpful person to have around. It underlines that principle that the skills we develop in the path here offer their results not only to the person developing them, but to the people that you come into contact with. When I was in Thailand recently, I was interviewed on a radio station. Inevitably the topic came up, “How do you make sense of all the strife that’s going on?” They said, “Well, it’s inevitable if you’re going to try to find your happiness in what they call worldly dhammas, material gain, status, praise.” There’s going to be conflict because those kinds of pleasures are a zero-sum game. If you gain something, somebody else has to lose. If you gain material wealth, somebody else has lost something someplace. It’s not for nothing that they say people make a killing on the stock market, because often that’s what happens. Somebody in some place is being deprived of money that they might actually need in order to stay alive, as you’ve made your profit. Similarly with status. If you gain a particular position, that means somebody else was not able to gain that position. So on down with praise and sensual pleasures. One side gains, another side loses. So it’s inevitable that there’s going to be conflict. But if you look for happiness in the skills that the Buddha teaches, there’s no need for conflict. When you’re generous, you benefit. When you’re virtuous, you benefit. When you meditate, you benefit. The people around you benefit. It’s a happiness that spreads around. When you’re kind to other people, again, you benefit, they benefit. It’s like that analogy the Buddha gives as the acrobat. The one acrobat is standing on another acrobat’s shoulders. The one being stood on says, “Okay, now you look out after me, and I’ll look out after you, and we’ll come down safely.” They’re up in the end of a bamboo pole. And the acrobat on top says, “No, it’s not going to work out that way. I have to look out after myself, and you look out after yourself, and that way we help each other. I maintain my balance, you maintain your balance. That way we help each other maintain our balance.” And the Buddha said in that particular state, in that particular situation, it was the acrobat on top who was right. But he also says there are times when, by being kind, you benefit, you develop good qualities of mind. As you develop mindfulness, other people benefit, because you’re showing more restraint, you’re showing more control over your actions. So the happiness that comes from the practice of the Dhamma is not the kind of happiness that’s going to cause strife or going to cause trouble. It’s when we abandon this kind of happiness and go back to looking for our happiness in the ways of the world. That’s when there’s bound to be conflict. So as you sit here meditating, remind yourself this is a gift to yourself and to the people around you. If there are days when you say, “Well, this is good enough for me,” then you have to ask yourself, “Well, what do you have here? Is this good enough for other people too?” And that gives you a little extra oomph to practice so much the better, both for yourself and for the world around you.

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