The Inevitable Emergency

September 2, 2010

This evening he got the news that an old friend had passed away. And it was all very sudden. It wasn’t until just three months before he died that he got news that he had cancer. And he didn’t have much time to get his life in order, because it turned out that the treatment probably hastened his death. And news like that, of course, stirs up several things at once in the mind. One is a sense of gratitude for having such a good friend. Two, regret that I hadn’t been in touch with him. And of course, three, the third one, is you start reflecting back on yourself. Your death could come suddenly at any time. You wouldn’t have time to straighten out your affairs. So you have to prepare yourself ahead of time. You hear stories of people who find out that they have a year to live or a month to live, and they start ordering their priorities, deciding, “Well, if you don’t have much time to live, you better focus on what’s important.” Which is good that they’re able to do that. But the question is, why do you wait? We all know we don’t have much time to live. Some of us have a little bit more than others. But still, it’s not much. So the question is, why don’t you focus on what’s important? And let the trivial stuff go. One of the Buddha’s reflections is that every evening at sunset, like the sunset we had just now, you should reflect on the fact that this might be your last sunset. You could very easily die in the night. Is there any unfinished business in your mind? What does the Buddha want you to focus on? All too often, our minds go to unfinished projects. “I’d like to get that done. I’d like to get this done. Then I’ll go.” But when death comes, it doesn’t give you any time like that. What you do have at that point is the state of your mind, plus all the mental skills you’ve developed. And some of us have some pretty bad skills. We’re good at complaining. We’re good at getting upset. We’re good at feeling put upon. We’re good at feeling treated unfairly. And if those are our skills, they’re going to make things worse. We don’t think that we’ve actually developed these as skills, but every time you keep repeating a particular habit, that becomes your set of skills. And so for some of us, our skills drag us down, which is why you have to turn around and develop different skills in their place. Equanimity about what comes can’t be changed. So you can focus on what can be changed, where you can make a difference. This is where the Buddha’s teachings on developing and letting go come in. On the one hand, you want to be able to develop your concentration, keep your mindfulness strong regardless. On the other hand, you want to keep in mind the fact that you want to act skillfully, try to remember as many of the genuine skills that you can, and the discernment to see which is which. What are the things that you should develop? What are the things you should let go? What are the things you just simply accept? One of the reasons why we meditate is because a lot of the skills that we’ll need at death are the skills we’re working on right now. The ability to stay with the breath regardless. Even when pain comes up in the body, you want to be able to focus the mind on what’s skillful. Not get all up in arms about what you don’t like about the pain, or what you don’t like about this, that, or the other thing. The ability to keep the mind calm. And when a thought world comes up, the ability to say, “No, I don’t have to go there.” Because when the mind realizes it can’t stay in the body any longer, it’s going to grab onto anything that comes its way, if you haven’t trained it. But if you have, then you can choose. Does this thought world look good? Does that one look good? Do feelings of regret come up at that point? And they will. Nobody wants to die quite so quickly. And it’s very easy to think of things you wish you had done or had said or wish you hadn’t done or hadn’t said. People you’re going to miss. Things you’re going to miss. The Buddha says, “Put those things out of your mind.” And don’t wait until you’re about to die before you learn how to put things out of your mind. This is why you’re practicing concentration. And why it’s a necessary skill not to just kind of allow the mind to wander wherever it’s going to go in a kind of choiceless tour of the possibilities of the present moment. You have to choose what’s a good thing to focus on. We work on the breath right here. Of course, at the moment of death, the breath is going to go. So eventually you want to be able to focus on awareness in and of itself. The breath has an anchor to keep us in the present moment so we don’t wander off after different thought worlds. Until the point where we can get that sense of just awareness, knowing, really strong. Then you can focus there. And if you can’t go any further than that, that’s a good place to be. Because it protects you from a lot of the arm-flailing things that happen in the mind when you can’t stay with the body any longer. So it’s right here that all the work is going to have to happen and all the skills have to be developed. Because it’s right here that when death comes, it’s going to come right here. At the moment it’s off someplace else at some other time, but there’ll be that sudden shock. That’s right now. And if you’re prepared, the shock won’t be so bad and you’ll know what to do. It’s like people who’ve prepared for emergencies, as opposed to people who haven’t. To prepare for an emergency, you have to keep a few important things in mind and have a good checklist. And make sure your skills haven’t gotten rusty. It’s the same with preparing for the emergency of death. We’re working on those skills right now, and you want to keep them well-honed. You want to work on your concentration, work on your mindfulness, work on your discernment. Because those are the skills that are really going to come in handy. So, as the Buddha said, when you see someone’s dead, remind yourself, “This body, too, is of that nature. It has not avoided that fate.” So you can develop an attitude of heedfulness. Heedfulness is the basis of everything that’s skillful. And it’s a quality that brings the path to completion. So every day, when the sun rises, remind yourself, “You’ve got to be heedful. This could be your last sunrise. When the sun sets, this could be your last sunset.” So take care of what’s important. Make sure that the mind is trained.

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