Thinking About Death

September 27, 2010

We work with the breath to get a sense of well-being, a sense of ease, a sense of fullness, a sense of stability inside. Now, the pleasure that comes from this is a special kind of pleasure. It goes deep, it can suffuse the body, and it doesn’t require that much from things outside. So it’s good to take time to develop this skill. Because the mind wants pleasure, and if it doesn’t get pleasure in harmless ways, it’s going to start looking for harmful ways. Ways that are either harmful to others or harmful to yourself. Because even ways of finding pleasure that are not really harmful to other people, still they can develop bad habits in the mind. You start getting attached to your body, you start getting attached to sensual pleasures, and then these things are going to be taken away. And if you don’t have any other source of happiness or source of stability, you’re just going to be left grasping and flailing your arms. So as you’re working with the breath, it’s important to realize that it’s not just that you feel good in the present moment. You’re going to use that sense of ease, you’re going to use that sense of pleasure for something even more important. It helps you look at things that are hard to look at, think about things that are hard to think about. On the one hand, we don’t like looking at our defilements. In fact, we often don’t even admit that they’re defilements at all, just the way the mind naturally is. But still, we don’t like looking at our greed or our anger or our delusion or our jealousy. We don’t like thinking about death or aging. And yet, if we don’t look at these things or think about them, we’re in big trouble. We won’t be prepared. We have no idea what to do, no idea of how to handle them. And so it’s an important skill to be able to put the mind in the right frame of mind. So you’re coming from a sense of ease, well-being, stability inside. So you can think about these things, look at these things without feeling threatened by them. And as the Buddha said, we have three main tools in our arsenal for dealing with issues of this sort. We call them three types of fabrication. There’s the breath, which is your bodily fabrication. And there’s directed thought and evaluation. These are called verbal fabrication. It’s the way the mind talks. And then there’s mental fabrication, feelings and perceptions. The feelings you create in the body are an important part of that. The feelings you create in the mind are important as well. And the perceptions you hold in mind are important tools. Now, for most of us, these things actually become tools that we turn on ourselves. When an issue comes up, say it’s anger, we start breathing in ways that feel really uncomfortable. So you feel that there’s something you’ve got to get out of your system. And the way we talk to ourselves about the situation aggravates the situation. The images we hold in mind and the feelings we’re creating by the way we breathe and by the way we think, these get the mind even more irritated. So the way you fabricate is actually harmful to you and not helpful. As the Buddha said, there are some problems in the mind that go away simply when you look at them. But there are others that require that you do what he calls “exerting a fabrication,” i.e., you bring one of these three things to bear, or all three. Then you start with the breath. That’s why we practice breath meditation day in and day out, day in and day out, because it’s what enables the other forms of fabrication not to be just mental exercises or thought games. The way you breathe embodies a lot of your attitudes. So if you can teach yourself to breathe calmly in the face of whatever comes up, that’s going to have an impact on all the other activities in the mind. So try to sensitize yourself to what kind of breathing really does feel good right now, because this is going to be your friend, this is going to be your weapon against harmful states of mind. Try to familiarize yourself with the way the breathing feels, say, down the front of the body. Does it feel like an open channel? Down through the neck, through the chest, in front of the abdomen. How about the back? Does that feel like an open channel? Down through the spine. You might survey the joints in your hands, in your fingers, or in your feet, in your toes. See where the body is moving. That’s one of the most sensitive to variations in the breath. It’s usually down this line right in front of the body. It might be in the neck, it might be in the chest, in the abdomen, or up in the head, in the forehead, in the middle of the head, the palate. Each of us has our own sensitive spots. It’s important that you learn to realize which ones are yours. The ones where, if tightness comes up, it’s going to hit there first, which then forms a basis for tension to spread out in patterns throughout the rest of the body. This is really important to know, because if patterns of tension depend on one particular being tensed up, then you make it your business to keep that one relaxed all the time, regardless, no matter what happens. That’s the first thing you should check for. Is there tension right there? Breathe through it, relax it, and you find that a lot of other patterns of tension begin to get disconnected. Then try to maintain a sense of fullness at that part. Doesn’t feel empty or hungry. Then, when you’ve got the body on your side, you can start looking at the way the mind talks to itself about a particular issue that’s coming up, or a particular perception you’re holding in mind, to see if it’s really skillful. If you have trouble finding a particular issue, there are plenty that are out there. One of the things the Buddha has you do every day at sunset and at sunrise, he says, “Just stop and reflect. This could be your last sunset. Are you ready to go?” The mind will often answer, “Well, no.” Then you should ask, “Well, what’s left that’s going to make it difficult to go?” Then the answer is whatever unskillful states of mind come up that you haven’t been able to deal with. Again, at sunrise, he has you remind yourself, “This could be your last sunrise. Are you ready to go?” Then you find there are things that spring up in the mind that you’ve got to work on. Our fear of death, he says, is based around four things. One is attachment to the body. Two, attachment to sensuality. Three, it’s concern over unskillful or cruel things we’ve done in the past. And then the fourth is uncertainty about the Dhamma. In other words, is there something deathless in the mind, or is death the end? And if you find any of those issues coming up in the mind at the thought of death, you know what you’ve got to work on. Again, it’s best to do this contemplation when the mind is calm and when it’s still, and you have this sense of awareness, this sense of the knower, firmly in place. For instance, contemplating the body, we have that chant on the thirty-two parts. You bring that up to mind and ask yourself, “What’s the body worth being attached to?” And part of you says, “Well, if the body didn’t have this part or that part, it couldn’t function, so it’s got to hold on to that.” But you realize you can’t identify with any of these things. Is there anything there that’s really worth identifying with? You check it part by part by part. And they have their functions, and they’re useful as long as the body’s going to be working. All the parts are working together, but they’re not always going to work together. We find this more and more as we get older. And always keep in mind the statement that these things are not worth identifying with. For the time being, you can identify with that sense of knowing, or just stay at that level of simply knowing, being aware. Because there’s something in there that doesn’t die. The body’s going to die when you grow old, but there’s something in the mind that doesn’t die. And that’s what you want to look for. And one of the reasons you can’t see it is because you’re so attached to the body. So this contemplation is useful to cut away all your unnecessary attachments. If you’re not going to let go forever, at least practice letting go. Once you’re perfectly content to be with this sense of awareness, awareness, awareness, it starts by finding its focal point with the breath, and then it is able to turn in on itself. You’re just aware of the knower. And that can be your place of refuge for the time being. You’ll find that as you get to know it better, there are layers here. At least you’re heading in the right direction. As for sensuality, it’s the same sort of thing. The Buddha noted that we’re not so much attached to our objects of desire as we’re attached to this process of desiring itself, all the thoughts and plans and anticipations that go around desiring something. We can work on those for hours. You can plan a meal and think about how delicious it’s going to be, and think about it for hours and hours and work on it. But when you actually eat it, it doesn’t take all that much time. And if you’re actually to look at the actual pleasure of the eating process, you find that it’s very fleeting. But the obsession with thinking about this and planning, it’s good to ask yourself exactly what gets accomplished by this. The Buddha’s image is of a dog lying on a set of bones. There’s no nourishment there at all. The only flavor is the flavor of its own saliva. When you’ve got the pleasure that comes from a concentrated mind, it’s easier to look at the drawbacks of sensuality this way and really be able to get past them, get past your attraction, get past your attachment, because you’ve got something better to hold on to. As for the third cause for fear—memory of harmful things we’ve done to other people—there’s no way you can go back and undo the harm, but you can resolve that you’re not going to repeat it. This is the best thing that can be asked of a human being—recognizing a mistake and resolving not to repeat the mistake. And then the Buddha recommends that you develop what he calls your sublime attitudes, like the chants we had this evening. You say, “May I be free from suffering. May those who are happy not be deprived of their happiness.” And in cases where you can’t be of any effect, you say, “All beings are the owners of their actions.” In some cases, there’s only so much we can do. The Buddha says if you develop these attitudes and are able to extend them to everybody whenever appropriate, you expand your mind. And if there is any past bad karma, it’s not going to have the impact it would if the mind were not expanded. In the same way, you want to learn how to deal with pain, how to understand pain, so that you don’t latch onto it, you don’t bring it in to weigh down the mind. And at the same time, with pleasure. You don’t just wallow in pleasure. Like the pleasure of concentration, it’s not here just to wallow in. It’s here to use. When you’re focused on the breath, then regardless of how strong the pleasure, how strong the rapture, keep holding on to the breath. You’re establishing a foundation of mindfulness. You’re establishing a frame of reference. You can’t let yourself get overcome by the pleasure, because if you let yourself get overcome by pleasure, it’s easy to be overcome by pain. They’re going to be there in the body, both the pleasure and the pain, but you have to learn how to not get sucked into them. If you can develop meditation in these two sorts—dealing with pleasure and pain, extending the sublime attitudes to all beings—then the effect of any past bad karma you’ve done is hardly going to be felt. It’s going to be much less painful. Much weaker than it would be otherwise. In other words, you don’t have to suffer from it. So when you develop these types of meditation, you can face the prospect of death with a lot more confidence. As for uncertainty about the Dhamma, there’s only one way to cure that, and that’s having your first taste of awakening. You dig through those layers and peel off those layers in the mind. Different layers of fabrication, different layers of attachment. You finally break through to something that really doesn’t die. You know because it’s outside of space and time. It’s not going to be touched by any of the changes of space and time. When you’ve had that experience, you know that there’s something deathless. There’s something that does not get annihilated. The body has to be dropped. Your memories of this lifetime have to be dropped. Your perceptions and thought-fabrications have to be dropped. Your awareness even of the six senses has to be dropped. But there is an awareness of something deathless inside. That doesn’t go. So when the Buddha asks, “Are you ready to die? Are you ready to go?” these are the things he’s talking about. These are the things you can work on. It’s not the case that there is no manual for dying. The Buddha said, “There are these skills that you can develop that can make it a lot easier. With aging, you don’t have to suffer. With illness, you don’t have to suffer. Even with death, you don’t have to suffer.” As you work on the mind, if you’ve worked on the mind, train the mind. And the first step is this—putting the mind in the right frame so it can live with these issues with a certain amount of detachment, a certain amount of objectivity. So the simple thought of these things doesn’t scare you off, that you’re ready for it. You don’t feel threatened. You realize, “This is the way things are, and we can prepare.” This is an attitude the Buddha calls heedfulness. He says it’s the basis for all the skillful things we can do. We realize that there are dangers in life, but the dangers that are worst are the ones that come from our own minds. Fortunately, we have the qualities of mind that we can develop, so the mind doesn’t have to be dangerous to itself. These processes of fabrication, losing the breath, the verbal discussion going on in your mind, the feelings and perceptions you apply to things. These can be weapons that you don’t turn on yourself, but you turn on your craving, you turn on your clinging. You turn on anything that would pose a danger from within the mind. This is an important part of the practice, taking these tools, which we so often misuse, and learning how to put them to good use. So you can realize the truth of the fact that suffering is optional, that it’s something unnecessary. There may be pain in the body—this is the natural part of the body—but there doesn’t have to be suffering in the mind. And learning how to put suffering to good use and learning how to make that distinction real is one of the most important skills you can develop.

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