Spending Your Last Night

January 21, 2011

Take a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths. Notice how it feels. If it feels good, keep it up. If not, you can change. Try to notice what kind of breathing feels best right now. Think of breathing as a whole body process, your whole nervous system is involved. It’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but it’s the movement of energy through the body that allows the air to come in and out. Try to experience that as fully as you can, all the way throughout the body. Now, as for anything else that comes up right now, you just let it go. You’re working on a skill here. And skills are important. It’s the heedful people of the world who realize that we need to train the mind, we need to develop skills, in order to be truly happy. In fact, as the Buddha said, the basis for all skillfulness—in other words, the basis for all things that are good in the world—is heedfulness. It’s the realization that there are dangers out there, but you can prepare for them. Your actions do make a difference. So you want to be careful. Be careful about your values, be careful about what you’re doing, every area where you have a choice. You want to try to make that choice as effective as possible, as skillful as possible. Being heedful really should take first priority in our lives. Otherwise, we fruit away our time and waste a lot of opportunities, and end up with bits and pieces of happiness, but not the real thing. Just little pleasures here and there, and then they go away. And what are we left with? Nothing much. The memory starts to fade and gets reworked. So who knows what actually happened? But in the meantime, we are left with our karma, what we did in order to get those pleasures. We’re also left without a habit of trying to suck as much pleasure out of sight, sound, smells, taste, tactile sensations, and ideas as we can. So we keep sucking at things that don’t provide much nourishment. But do leave us with a lot of karma, a lot of history that we carry around, a lot of habits. So try to look carefully at your life to see what’s really important. Then develop the skills that are needed to attain what’s important. One of the exercises the Buddha recommends is, every day, at sunrise, remind yourself that this could be your last day. It’s so easy to die. And death doesn’t come with any foreclosure notices or any advanced warnings. We have our advanced warnings. We see other people die. We see the effects of aging in our own bodies. But there’s no clear warning that it’s going to happen on a particular day. This could be your last day. What should you do? How should you spend the time? What should you devote yourself to? The same with the evening. At sunset, remind yourself this could be your last sunset. You could die in the night. Are you ready to go? What needs to be done? What do you want to do? And a lot of people, when they hear this question, think, “Well, I could do this. I could take cocaine. I’ve never had cocaine in my life. I wonder what that’s like. I’d like to visit this spot. I’d like to have that experience.” In other words, the mind is still caught up in accumulation. It’s still caught up in that habit of wanting to accumulate experiences, even though you may not be able to take things with you. But maybe you can take experiences. People sometimes think, “Well, that’s not the case. You forget a lot of things when you die.” What do you have left? You have that bad habit of looking in the wrong places for happiness. You think about how much people spend their time trying to accumulate things and accumulate experiences, and they end up with really nothing but that habit. Is that something you want to take with you? A more valuable use of your time, a longer-lasting use of your time, would be to develop skills, good mental skills. Because these things have an impact on how you die, how you’re reborn, what kind of mind states, what kind of habits you take with you. And even if you don’t die in the middle of tonight, you’ll have good habits to carry over to tomorrow, and the next day, and the next day, as long as you’re still alive. This is what heedfulness means, is realizing that your actions are important. They’re the most important thing you do in your life. Your habits, your karma, these things are really things that do have an impact, a long-term impact. Then determine whether you’re going to find true happiness or only the ersatz kind of happiness. So focus on developing skills, developing good habits. Because that carries over for a long, long time. Right now, a good habit is learning how to get your mind under your control. You focus on something that you’ve made up your mind you really do want to focus on, and then you stay there. Maintain your interest in the breath. Maintain your ability to stay focused here. It develops mindfulness, it develops alertness, qualities that really do strengthen the mind. It develops concentration, something that provides real nourishment for the mind, a sense of well-being, a sense of stillness and ease. Because, as the Buddha said, there is no true happiness aside from peace. So the more peaceful the mind, the more internal happiness arises that doesn’t have to depend on those little whiffs of pleasure that come by. Pleasures and pains can come by, but if the mind has its own internal sense of well-being, it can be in any situation. You can be truly happy. That’s something you can attain through your habits, through your skills. You can’t attain that by collecting experiences, collecting things, collecting relationships, collecting whatever the world has to offer in terms of things and things and status, praise, whatever. You have your skills, and you can take them with you. It’s like people who are forced to emigrate from their home. Many times the order to go comes so quickly they can’t gather up their things. But they do have their skills. And the more skills they have, the wider range of skills they have, the easier they find it to survive wherever they end up. It’s the same with us as we go from day to day and life to life. It’s our skills that enable us to survive, in other words, enable our goodness to survive, our sense of well-being. As the Buddha said, one of the traditions of the Noble Ones is that you delight in abandoning and you delight in developing. In other words, you delight in abandoning unskillful qualities of our life. I need to delight in developing skillful ones. That’s very different from the ways of the world. People delight in things. They delight in new relationships. They delight in accumulating experiences. That’s where the delight lies. But they’re setting themselves up for a fall. Because you look at the nature of the world, we live in a world with a lot of suffering. And it’s only a fortunate few that can manage to get through a human lifetime and not really suffer a lot. The ones who don’t suffer are the ones who have those internal skills. They don’t suffer from their own pains. They don’t suffer from the sufferings of others. They don’t weigh themselves down. And that way they have a lot to offer. They offer not only themselves, but also the people around them. If you really get dragged down by all the sufferings of the world, you also drag down your own ability to help. It’s by developing your inner strengths that you can be of service not only to yourself, but if you have leftover energy, be of service to others as well. So you’re not the only person who benefits from the meditation. As with any skill, you share your skills with others. You share the results of the skills with others as well. If you’re a good musician, you’re not the only one who takes pleasure from the music. Other people can take pleasure as well. If you’re a good carpenter, a good cook, a good writer, you share the results of the benefits of the skill spread out. Even more so if you’re a good meditator. It’s the ultimate skill, the ability to not suffer, not cause yourself any suffering, not cause anybody else any suffering. And at the very least, set an example to others how they can develop that skill within themselves as well, how they can find that happiness. So if this were your last night, what would be the best way to spend it? Well, you’re here meditating. That’s a very good way of spending it. You’re adding to your range of skills, which is one of the wisest uses of your time.

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