Practice in How to Die Well

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Zen Jeon Fung used to say, “What are we practicing as we practice meditation? We’re practicing how to die.” Because when you die, you don’t want your mind to be in a turmoil. You want it to be focused. And you want to have some control over where you’re going to focus it. And if you can’t focus it now, while your body is relatively healthy and strong, it’s going to be really hard. When your body is weak and you’ve received your eviction notice, you’ve got to leave. So make up your mind where you’re going to focus now and stay right there. If there’s any temptation to move off and choose another topic, just let it go, let it go. If you’re going to stay with the breath, you have the option of staying anywhere in the body. And you want to hold on to the perception that everything you feel in the body is related in one way or another to the breath. So it gives you some latitude. You can focus in any spot in the body, any kind of sensation, and look at it as an aspect of breath. And as for other thoughts that come into the mind, just let them go. Think of your awareness as a very large field. There are cows wandering in the field, and there are other kinds of animals wandering in the field, but you don’t have to be involved with them. You’re with the field. You want to hold that perception in mind. This is what concentration is all about, all the way up through the dimension of nothingness. That’s what the Buddha calls perception attainment, holding one perception in mind. And when you’re focused on the breath, you can perceive it in different ways. You’ll find that there are some ways of perceiving the breath that are more calming, more spacious, more solid than others. If you think of the in-breath and the out-breath as something radically different, it’s not going to be quite so easy to settle down. If you think of the whole body as this large range of breath energy, there’s room for both the in-breath and the out-breath. And there’s no clear dividing line between the two. That allows the mind to have a little bit more continuity, a little bit more spaciousness. So you’re more and more inclined to want to stay with this perception. You read the teachings of all the Thai Jhans, and of the five aggregates, perception is the one they tend to focus on most as being the one that really makes a difference. It’s how you perceive things, the labels you put on things, the images you hold in mind. This makes a huge difference. You perceive pain in one way and it aggravates it. If you apply a different perception to it, it’s not quite so bad. If you can perceive your awareness as separate from the pain, that’s even more helpful. This especially will be useful as the body starts developing more and more pains. The pains are there, and again, they’re like cows wandering through a field. You’re with the field, you’re not with the cows. It’s important to ask yourself, when you have a perception of pain, how do you perceive it? Even though we know better, someplace in the mind there might be the perception that the pain has an intention. It’s there to torment you. So consciously tell yourself, “The pain doesn’t know anything. It has no intentions at all. It’s just there. It’s just the result of certain conditions in the body, certain conditions in the mind.” And perceive it as going away from you, not coming at you. We’ve talked in the past about thinking of yourself as riding in the back of a car, facing backwards. And as things come past, as soon as you’re aware of them, they’re going away. A sign comes by and it’s going away. A tree, it’s going away. Try to hold that perception of the pain going away, going away. Because pain does come in discrete moments. We do tend to have a perception that it’s all one continuous stream. But if you can see that there’s a moment between each perception of pain, you’ll see that you can think of each moment as going away, going away. Your mind is not in the line of fire. The same with the body. We know the body from the inside, based on our relationship with the breath. And as long as the breath is coming in and going out, there’s a sense of movement through the body. And that gives shape. If you allow the breath to calm down, calm down, so it’s just a sense of breath energy in a large field, you get to the point where the shape of the body begins to get more amorphous. It’s like a fog or a cloud that doesn’t have any clear outline. Hold that perception in mind. Then you can focus on the space in between. Focusing on space is really useful, especially when it’s time to leave the body. If you can’t focus on anything better, focus on space. I think I’ve told you the story before. The old woman who was a student of Ajaan Fu, who was meditating one night, and this voice came in and said to her, “You’re going to die tonight.” And she had the presence of mind to think, “Well, if I’m going to die, I might as well die meditating.” So she stayed with the body, stayed sitting in meditation. She said the body began to feel like it was like a house on fire. There was no place anywhere in the body where she could focus her attention. It was like she was being pushed out. And then she thought of space. Regardless of what happens with the elements in the body, she said space is always something separate. So she focused on the space and stayed with that sensation, that perception of space around the body. It was like permeating through all the little atoms in the body. And when she finally came back to the sense of the body, everything had calmed down. She didn’t die. But she learned an important lesson. When things get really difficult in the body, go for space, or go for awareness, what it is that knows the space. That’s where anything else that comes up, perceive it as separate. That’s where you’re working on some habits, you’re working on some skills. They’re not only useful for when you’re going to die, they’re useful for sitting right here, right now. But that’s one of the important messages of the Dhamma, is that the Dhamma is the same whether you’re surviving this moment or whether you’re going to die. It’s all an issue of the mind and how it relates to its objects, in particular how it relates to its desires. It’s going to use the desires to take on a particular state of becoming or not. Becoming being your sense of who you are in a particular world of experience. And the way you perceive things is going to have a big impact on what you desire. If you learn how to look at the desires in the light of different perceptions, you begin to see that you have the choice of how you’re going to perceive things, what labels you’re going to put on things. So at the very least, you want to use labels that lead to skillful desires, that lead to states of becoming that are blameless, that don’t involve a lot of suffering. These are skills you can work with as you focus here on the breath. As for other things that may come up, it’s not going to be just physical pain when the time comes to go. There’s a huge potential for mental pain. Things you regret having done, things you regret not having done, worries about what you’re leaving behind. The Buddha said the number one thing when you find that you’re going to be leaving is don’t worry about what you’re leaving behind. It’ll take care of itself. If you’re with someone who’s dying and they seem to be worried about either the people they’re leaving behind or projects they’ve left unfinished, put their mind at rest. That’s the most important thing, because otherwise they’re just going to come back. Just remember, there’s nothing they can do about these things right now. These things will take care of themselves. A woman who came to see a jang fu yin went home. She was going to spend a couple weeks at the monastery. After the second day, she came to say goodbye. She was going to go back home. He asked her why. She said she was worried about the people back home. How were they going to get along without her? So he told her, “Assume that you’ve died. They’re going to have to get along, one way or another.” And so that’s what she did. She was able to stay for the two weeks. So the first thing is to put down worries. The second step is asking yourself what you’re going to go for when you leave this body. Because there will come a point where you can’t stay here. No matter how nice the breath is right now, it’s not going to stay nice. There’ll come a point where you just can’t breathe. The heart will stop. Before you go to that, you’re being evicted. And most people just go to the first thing that comes past. But you have to remind yourself, you don’t have to go for whatever comes up in the mind. Because this is how becoming happens. There’ll be an image, and you’ll see that you can go into the image, and that’s what leads to your next breath. It’s the same process as life. It happens when we fall asleep and start dreaming. So remember, the lesson you’ve learned from the meditation is that you have your choice of where you’re going to focus. And if a bad image comes up, you don’t want to go there. You don’t have to go there. This is another one of the reasons why, when someone is dying, you try to remind them of all the good things they’ve done. Not the good times they’ve had in the past, because that can lead to sadness. But the good things they’ve done, to strengthen them, so that if they see something really scary, they don’t go for it. They don’t say, “I don’t have to go there.” And remember that yourself. If nobody else is around to remind you, do your best to remind yourself of the good things you’ve done. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has you think about your virtue and your generosity as a meditation topic, what he calls the recollection of the devas. The qualities that the devas had that led them to become devas, you’ve got those in your mind as well. This protects you from falling into, say, an image of an animal world or an image of something even less fortunate. You can hold out. We all have a mixture of good and bad karma, and so the possibility of good or bad things appearing at that point is a very alive possibility. But if you’ve been practicing mindfulness and practicing alertness, practicing concentration and this ability to make the most of the fact that you’ve got choices as you meditate, you’ll be able to make the most of your potential for choices as you die. So all the skills we’re learning right here will come in handy, not only while you’re sitting here, not only while you go through the day and have your regular life, but that other regular part of life, which is the fact that it’s going to end sometime. As long as the mind hasn’t been totally trained to be on any kind of defilement, there’s going to be another birth. So at the very least, you want to take on a birth where you can continue practicing. There’s a tradition in Buddhism that goes back to the appadanas of when you make merit, dedicate it. A lot of people dedicate it for this, that, and the other thing. Most of the forester chants encourage people to dedicate it, “May I please be able to continue practicing wherever I go.” That puts you on the right trajectory. But don’t underestimate what can be accomplished at the moment of death. There are cases in the canon of people whose lives were kind of a mess, but they were able to pull themselves together at the last moment. You don’t want to bank on that. But your opportunities to die well are a lot better if you meditate well. So when the time comes to leave the body, take that as a practice opportunity. Because that’s your time when you can really perform. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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