Awareness Doesn’t Die

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We bring our attention to the breath. Try to stay with the breath so we can create a sense of ease inside the body. This sense of inner ease is an important part of the path because it allows us to find well-being inside in a way that doesn’t have to depend on the outside senses. You can be in a place that doesn’t look good, doesn’t sound good, doesn’t smell good, doesn’t taste good, doesn’t feel good. But there can still be well-being in the mind. That’s where you find safety. That’s where you find a sense of security. Because there are so many things in the world in life we’re going to have to let go of. And here the Buddha is providing us something to hang on to. We’re going to have to let go of those things. One of my favorite Dhamma books, a pair of books, comes from a series of Dharma talks that Jhammabhava gave to a woman who came to his monastery one time. She had bone cancer. She was going to die. And she wanted to spend some time meditating and get her mind in good shape. So Jhammabhava said, “I can’t be responsible for your physical health.” So she brought along a friend who was a retired doctor. And he gave her a Dhamma talk every night for three months. Then, after the original woman died, the friend, who was a doctor, took all the tapes they had made of his talks and transcribed them. And that’s how we have the books. One of the things that Ajahn Mahaprabhu keeps stressing over and over again is that the mind doesn’t die. This awareness of ours. If it can’t stay in this body, it’ll move on, in line with its past actions, in line with its present actions. But it doesn’t die. It simply moves. It keeps on moving until it’s trained itself to the point where it doesn’t have to go anywhere at all. Then it’s free. But it doesn’t die. He kept reminding her of that, that this one thing you can always trust in, this awareness of ours, doesn’t die. And so we train it so that what does have to leave the body goes to a good place. And while it’s in the body, it doesn’t have to suffer so much. We have those reflections on how aging, illness, and death are inevitable. The Thai translation is that they’re normal. Aging is normal. Illness is normal. Death is normal. These things are just normal parts of life. Once you’re born, whether you realize it or not, you’ve signed on. We also have that reflection on the requisites—food, clothing, shelter, and medicine—partly to make sure that we don’t overuse them, but also to reflect on exactly how much do we really need. Oftentimes it’s a lot less than we think. But there’s another aspect of that reflection as well, realizing that you’ve been born into this world and you’ve got this big gaping hole. The body needs food, needs clothing, shelter, medicine. So it’s always in a precarious position. So we take care of it. We don’t abandon it, because it’s very useful for us. For a lot of things. But we also have to realize that it’s got problems built in. As Buddha said, you have eyes where there are diseases for your eyes. You have ears where there are diseases for the ears. Every part of your body has a disease or several diseases that can come there. So we’re living in a precarious position. Thinking about that doesn’t make it worse. It actually allows us to prepare. I know a lot of therapists who come and they say it’s amazing that when the Buddha talks about the roots of unskillful behavior, he doesn’t mention fear. He mentions greed, aversion, delusion. But in therapy they deal a lot with fear. They’re wondering if maybe they should add it. And as the Buddha does point out, there are times when your behavior does go off course because of fear. But it’s not so much the fear itself. It’s skillful fear and unskillful fear. Unskillful fear is fear combined with greed, aversion, and delusion. Skillful fear is the fear that motivates you to practice. The Buddha calls it heedfulness. In some places he calls it compunction. In other words, the fear that you would do something that would lead to unfortunate results. In other words, the fear of doing something unskillful. That’s compunction. And there are dangers, both outside and inside. But you can prepare for them. If we couldn’t prepare, there’d be no need for heedfulness. It wouldn’t make any difference. But we can prepare. So what sort of fear do you have around the body, around food, clothing, shelter, medicine? Realize that the most secure place is training the mind. So that whatever happens, it’s not threatened by these things. You’ve got this sense of well-being inside. And in the course of developing this well-being, you’ve developed your powers of mindfulness, alertness, ardency. You’ve developed your discernment. These qualities will enable you to handle whatever comes. So the fear that the Buddha recommends is a clear eye. It’s one that sees dangers but is not shaken by them. It doesn’t get thrown off course. Realize that these things are normal. A couple months back I wrote an article that was put up on a website on how danger is normal. It started out with the fact that aging, illness, and death are there. They’re normal. And one of the comments that was put up was, “Gee, isn’t this horrible? The Buddha’s saying that aging, illness, and death are dangerous. They’re wonderful things.” I’ve never seen aging, illness, and death wonderful things. They are dangerous. But the Buddha gives us the skills to deal with them. People sometimes talk about how the Buddha’s emphasis on stress and suffering in the First Noble Truth is very pessimistic. The First Noble Truth, yes, that would be pessimistic. But there are four Noble Truths. The second one is that you can figure out a cause for the suffering. The third one is that you can bring an end to the suffering. The fourth one tells you how to do it, which is all very pessimistic. Pessimistic? No. It’s very optimistic. In fact, it’s much more optimistic than a lot of other teachings out there that say, “Well, just try to pretend it’s not going to happen.” It’s when you’re prepared that you can deal with dangers. If you know there’s a spot on one corner where people tend to get mugged, you learn how to avoid that spot. Whether it’s you go down and check it beforehand and see where your escape routes are. That’s when death comes. It will come in the present moment. There’ll be some day when, “Oh, here it is, right here, right now.” And if you really know the present moment well enough, you can avoid getting torn apart. You know there’s an escape route here. The problem is we get involved in things that expose us to danger. But if we learn how to untangle ourselves, as we’re doing right now, you put down a lot of the affairs of the world, you put down a lot of other concerns. You don’t even have to think about the fact that you’re in this room with these people. It’s just you and the breath. And even the “you” there, you can strip down as much as you want. It’s just awareness and the breath. And you can dodge a lot of problems that way, problems that the mind creates for itself. As for the problems outside, you realize that they’re problems simply because of the problems the mind creates for itself. So what you take care of in here, out there, is not a threat. The Buddha offers this refuge, but it’s a refuge that we have to create for ourselves. He offers us this safety. But we have to see this as safety. As the Buddha said, you learn to see renunciation as safety. He uses the word kema, which means safety and also means rest. That means letting go of a lot of things that we’re attached to. For most of us, that sounds like a prison. We’re lacking this, we’re lacking that. But when you let go of those things, you find yourself opening up to the possibilities and the potentials inside. And these can be so great that things outside don’t have that much of a hold on the mind anymore, and losing them is not so threatening. So do your best to build this sense of well-being inside. Get familiar with the breath. Get familiar with your sense of the body as you feel it from within. This develops your powers of focus, alertness, so that you’re not only feeling a sense of belonging here, feeling at home right here, but you’re also more able to see the little things that the mind does that nibbles away at its well-being. You can see right through them. So it’s this combination of concentration and discernment that provide you with the protection you need, the safety you need, in this world where danger is normal. But you can find a safe place. One of the images they give for the mind that’s well-trained is that you’re up on a mountain looking down on a valley below, or you’re up in a tower looking on people below. And you see all the confusion and everything that people down there get involved with, but you’re separate from that. Because you’ve got your tower, you’ve got your mountain. You’ve got this place inside where you’re actually above all these other things, and they can’t reach in to touch. And there’s no sense of deprivation in that at all. It’s the only place where there really is a sense of fullness and completion, satisfaction, as John’s called it, the place of enough. Everything is sufficient inside.

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