Choices at Death

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It’s good that we have practice with sitting with pain. We learn how not to fear it, how not to be pushed around. Because so many of the stupid things that people do in the world, so many of the harmful things they do, come from a fear of pain. If you can learn how not to be afraid of it, you can be brave in doing what’s good. There are four kinds of biased behavior. One is out of desire. One is out of anger or irritation or aversion. One is out of delusion. One is out of fear. And it’s the anger and fear that we have to watch out for when we’re dealing with pain. We get upset when it happens and we’re fearful of it, that it could happen again or it could get worse. And that drives our behavior. And lots of bad directions. The Pali word is akati, which means going to a place where you shouldn’t go. That’s one of the reasons why we want to learn how to endure it. But enduring is not enough. You want to comprehend it. And particularly, you want to comprehend the mental anguish that you develop around physical pain. When the Buddhas talk about the duties with regard to the Four Noble Truths, remember that the duty with regard to dukkha is to comprehend it, which means to overcome any passion you may have for it, to learn how to let go of passion, aversion, and delusion around it. He’s talking about the mental pain. We’re not passionate for physical pain, but we are passionate for the way we hang on to certain ways of relating to the pain. Often these are ways that we picked up when we were little kids, even before we could learn how to speak. We had to deal with pain. We developed certain strategies. They made sense at the time, but they often go underground. And as we grow up, learn language, and understand the mind in other ways better, oftentimes the subconscious ways of dealing with pain or negotiating with pain stay underground. So some really strange ideas can stay underground. Those are the things we’re passionate for. This is one of the reasons why, as the Buddha said, the craving and the clinging come from ignorance. We don’t know what it is that we’re doing. We haven’t really examined these things. So it’s good to examine the way you relate to the pain. And one good way of examining it is to learn how to ask questions about how you perceive the pain. Start out, make sure that your concentration is good. And if there’s a pain in one part of the body, you want to be able to focus on another part and not get waylaid by the pain. Just think, “That part belongs to the pain for the time being. I’m in another spot.” And make that spot as comfortable as you can with the breath. Then the next step is to spread that sense of good breath energy. You stay centered in your comfortable spot, but just think of radiating out that good energy that goes through the pain, dissolves the tension around the pain. And make sure it doesn’t stop at the pain. You don’t want the perception of the pain as a wall to be made even more wall-like. So hold the perception in mind that the breath can go through the pain. This way you get more confident in being able to just be with the pain, but not aggravate it. Because it’s that ability to relax around the pain that’ll enable you to focus on the pain and not aggravate it. If you can’t relax around the pain, then as soon as you focus on the pain, you make it worse. So first learn how to relax around it, get that good breath energy flowing. And then you look at the pain. You can start asking questions. Jhammabhava’s first question is, “Is the pain the same thing as the spot in the body where it’s located?” Say it’s in your knee or in your hip. Your hip, after all, has bones and tendons and things. But pain is something that comes and goes. You can also remind yourself that the body is made out of the four elements–earth, water, wind, fire, and other words–solidity, liquidity, energy, warmth. And the pain, even though sometimes it feels warm, is actually none of those. And yet we glom it onto the earth element, which makes the pain seem more solid than it actually is, and more fearsome than it actually is. So learn how to question, “Is it the same thing?” You should be able to come up with the answer, “No, it’s not.” And hold in mind that perception. They’re different things. The question is, “Is the pain solid?” No, it comes in little moments. Can you see the moments? When the moments come, are they coming at you, or are they just coming and disappearing? It’s like riding in a train. You’ve got your back to the engine. As the countryside goes past, as soon as you see anything, it’s going away from you. Think of the pain like that. These are just a few sample questions you might ask, or a few sample perceptions you might hold in mind. Allow yourself to see that the initial reaction you have toward the pain, which is as soon as there’s physical pain there’s going to be mental pain, is an unnecessary reaction and is built on lots of perceptions. Some of them are very strange, which is why often asking strange questions about the pain will help dig up some things that you hadn’t noticed. You’re doing this not to make the pain go away, but to change your relationship to it. In other words, you’re not passionate about your old way of relating to the pain. You want to find a new way. Because, after all, the fact of physical pain is something we have to accept. It’s part of having a body. But the mental pain is something we don’t have to accept. It’s something we don’t have to endure. And if you can learn how to separate the two and then be with physical pain, whatever it is, and not be mentally pained by it, that is not going to push you around. You’re not going to do stupid things out of desire or anger or delusion or fear. This is especially important as you approach death. Because the mind has to make a lot of choices at that point. A lot of us think, “Well, when time comes to die, you just die and that’s it. You don’t have any choice.” You have choices about where you’re going to go and what shape you’re going to be in as you go. And if you allow the pain to push you around, or if you’re weighed down by the pain, it’s going to be really hard to make clear-minded decisions. A lot of this stuff happens really fast. So you want to be prepared. The pain comes, but you’re not going to be pushed around by it. The same goes with mental pain. Because at that point there’ll be a lot of regrets. Things you didn’t do, things you did do. Disappointment about things you’re not going to be able to do. And you don’t want those to overcome the mind either. This is another skill we develop in meditation, which is learning how to step out of thought worlds. Because if you step into those thought worlds, if it happens at the time of death, that’s where you’re going to go. So you want to make sure you don’t go into a world that’s bad, that doesn’t give you an opportunity to practice. So again, you’re going to have to make some choices. Different things will appear. And all too often, when the body’s in pain and the mind is feeling distracted and really upset by things, the first thing that appears is what you jump for, whether it’s good or bad. That’s just the sense, “I can’t stay in the body anymore, and here’s someplace I can go.” Especially if there have been regrets about past actions you did and something bad appears, you think, “Well, this is going to be the punishment I deserve for that,” and you go with it. You have to remind yourself you don’t have to go. There are only a few actions that consign you to hell immediately after you die, and you haven’t done any of them. So if something bad appears, you don’t have to go there. But that means you have to have your wits about you. That means that you have to be able to not be overcome by pain, mental or physical. You have to develop your ability to pull yourself out. So as you’re sitting or meditating, you find the mind wandering off. Immediately pull yourself out. If it happens again, pull yourself out again. It may seem frustrating that the mind isn’t settling down, but the fact that you’re able to be alert enough and ardent enough to pull yourself out, that’s a sign of progress. Those are qualities you’re trying to develop, and this is how you develop them. So as we meditate, we’re getting lots of practice in not only how to live but also how to die. They’re all part of the same process. As soon as there’s birth, there’s going to be death. There’s a way to deal with all the issues in life and not suffer from them, and that includes the ending of life, death and rebirth. The best way, of course, is not to be reborn at all. But you do your best. And your ability not to be overcome by pain is going to allow you some space so you can make choices. Choices that you’re going to be happy that you can live with, because these are choices that really will be choices you have to live with. The whole shape of your next becoming depends on it. So you do good now in order to maximize the possibilities of good things coming up in your mind at that moment. But you also develop the skills you need to deal with whatever comes up in terms of physical pain, mental pain, desire, aversion, delusion, fear. You want to make sure you’re not relayed by any of those. The best thing to be doing is to be doing the duties of the Four Noble Truths or the duties of the right effort. Anything unskillful that hasn’t arisen you don’t let it arise. Anything unskillful that has arisen, you abandon it. Try to give rise to skillful things in the mind. And once they’re there, you try to maintain them. There’s work to be done as you’re leaving this body. So don’t let yourself get distracted from the work. It’s going to make a huge amount of difference in your future course. you

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