Solving the Big Problem

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A couple of years back, a famous monk complained about people meditating, that people going on meditation retreats are self-indulgent. They’re just having nice experiences for themselves, and they’re neglecting the real problems of the world. As he saw that the real problems are that people are hungry and people are suffering. We should get off our cushions. And do something about that. Meditation was a luxury in his eyes. It’s pretty astounding that a monk would say that. After all, the Buddha saw that the big problem in life is that we don’t know how to die. We meditate so we learn how to do it properly. The best way, of course, is to die and not come back. Failing that, you want to die. Go to a good place where you can continue practicing. You want to learn how to die without suffering from the death. The question comes up, what kind of meditation should you do then? What kind of mental state should you try to cultivate? What’s the same state that you’re trying to cultivate as you meditate now? The rules that will apply then are the same rules that apply now. We have this sense that when we’re meditating, any thought that comes up about a person or other people, you put it aside. Anything that comes up about the past or future, you put it aside. But when you’re outside from the meditation, other rules apply. It’s okay to think about other people. It’s okay to think about the past and the future. And there are times and places, of course, where that is appropriate. But there are also times and places when you’re meditating where it’s appropriate. When you’re thinking about extending God’s goodwill, it does involve other people. When you think about what you’re doing right now, you have to refer to the past. What lessons can you remember from the past that help you with your mind right now? And how are you preparing for the future? What habits are you developing? But the laws when you die are the same as when you’re sitting and meditating. There’s a passage where Mahanama, who’s one of the Buddhist cousins, comes to him. It’s the end of the rains retreat. The Buddha’s going to go off. Mahanama knows that there may be somebody’s going to die while the Buddha’s away. And what kind of counseling should he give that person who’s on his deathbed? And the Buddha said, the first thing you’ve got to watch out for is if the person is worried, worried about where he’s going, or worried about his family that he’s leaving behind, responsibilities he’s leaving behind. You have to tell the person, you’ve got to put those things aside. You can’t do anything about them right now. What you can do, of course, is working on the state of your own mind. That’s the first law. You’ve got to put your worries about the world, your sense of responsibility aside. You no longer have a role to play here. This becoming that you assumed is going to fall apart. And you’ve got to prepare yourself for whatever becoming the mind is going to create. So you have to focus inside. This is where the real work is. As for any distractions that come up, you’ve got to be careful. The Buddha compares dying to a fire. It’s burning a house and the wind blows it. And it can blow it in long ways. And winds can turn on you. They can turn into dust devils. They can turn into tornadoes. They can switch direction very quickly. The wind, of course, is craving. And then you cling to that craving. You might think, well this is good, I can go where I crave to go. But how much can you trust your cravings? And how can you trust that some other craving at cross-purposes may not suddenly grab hold of you? As the Buddha said, the mind can switch direction faster than anything else. And so you want to have your intention really clear and really solid. And it’s not going to be easy at a time like that. After all, you’re leaving this body. The body may be weak. You’ve got to make sure that your mind does not get weakened by the weakness in the body. That’s a tall order. So while you’re meditating here right now, you’ve got to work on keeping your mind strong, keeping your intention strong. You’re going to stay with the breath. You’re not going to let any cross winds come in and push you off. That’s the state of mind you’re trying to create then. It’s the state of mind you’re trying to create now. As for the distractions that come up, it’s striking how many of the distractions correspond to the hindrances when the Buddha talks about what can happen at death. It’s also striking that the number of hindrances that he says are best dealt with through developing goodwill. The obvious one, of course, is ill-will. But restlessness and anxiety, the Buddha also says, if you’re suddenly struck with remorse about something you did in this lifetime, you have to remind yourself, indulging in the remorse, wallowing in the remorse, is not going to win you brownie points. It’s not going to make that past action go away. It’s also going to weaken you. It’s going to be harder to not repeat that. So you admit that you made a mistake, and you resolve not to repeat it, telling yourself this is the best a human being can do. And then you spread thoughts of goodwill to the person you harmed, to yourself, and to all living beings. Thoughts of compassion, thoughts of empathetic joy, thoughts of equanimity. So you can put those memories down with a sense of peace, reminding yourself that we all make mistakes. And those mistakes you make are not the sort that would guarantee that you would go to a really bad place. If you can lift your mind, then you’re aiming yourself at a good place, regardless of what your past may have been. Remember the power of the present moment, and your intentions in the present moment. That’s really going to apply at the moment of death. As for doubt and uncertainty, you suddenly have doubts about the practice, remind yourself, there’s one thing I know is skillful, and that’s goodwill. Focus there. Again, thoughts of goodwill for everybody. Sensuality. The Buddha says remind yourself that there are pleasures that are much better than the human world. So think about those. And if you can lift your mind above the human realm, and think about the fact that while there are devas who find that they can go beyond sensuality, if you can keep your mind focused, get in a good state of concentration, go to one of those realms. As long as you’re going to have desire, make it a worthwhile desire, with a minimum of suffering. And ideally, the Buddha says, remind yourself that even the highest level of devas, the ones who are in states of concentration, they still suffer from self-identity. Can you let go of that? You could. So these are all instructions that apply to your meditation now, and would apply then as well. So as we’re sitting here meditating, we’re not ignoring the real problems in the world. We’re not running away and being self-indulgent. We’re trying to solve a problem that the world outside is not going to help us solve. No matter how much you try to help the world outside, they can’t come and aid you at the moment of death. This is where you have to take responsibility. Another complaint I’ve heard about the way we meditate is that we’re focused on the breath. Some people say, “Well, when you die, the breath is going to leave you. What are you going to do then?” You have to remember, when the Buddha teaches breath meditation, it’s not just focusing on the breath. He wants to make you sensitive to not only body, bodily fabrication, but also verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself. Mental fabrication, the images, perceptions you hold in mind. That’s the feeling tones that you focus on. And when the breath leaves you, these other forms of fabrication are going to have a huge role to play, how you talk to yourself at that time. Make a huge difference. When you realize you’re dying, you say, “This is it.” And then you tell yourself, “I’ve been practicing for this all along. This is time for me to really do it well.” Don’t talk about the things you’re leaving. Don’t talk about your fears. Talk about what you can do right now to keep your mind on an even keel. And the perceptions that come up, you have to choose them, which ones are going to be helpful, which ones are not. You’re practicing looking at your distractions as being inconstant, stressful, not-self. This will really be useful then. Your perception that you want to continue practicing, that’ll be really useful as well. As you can see, as we’re meditating right now, we’re working on the skills we’re going to need then. We’re not running away from the problems of the world. We’re facing our big problem that nobody else can help us with. Then we feel more confident in the face of death. Then you find that the fears that would ordinarily drive your life, the fears that would hold you hostage, have less and less power over you. So getting a sense of how to die well will also give you a sense of strength and how to live well. So we’re not just fooling around, not just playing around. in nice mental states. We’re trying to create good mental states that will help us as we live, as we die. And it’s probably the most important skill we can develop. Because you can face death with skill. What you’re doing right now shows how it can be done.

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