Death Is Normal

November 4, 2024

There’s a chant that we frequently repeat on the subject of aging, illness, death, the subject of separation. The Thai translation is aging is normal, illness is normal, death is normal. When we look at these things from a distance, they do seem normal. The news that there have been people dying in different parts of the world comes every day. When it comes up close to someone who’s close to us, it doesn’t seem normal at all. But we’ve got to get it into the right perspective. There was a king at the time of the Buddha named Vasanati, and he’d come to see the Buddha one day. And as he was talking to the Buddha, one of his courtiers came up and whispered in his ear that his favorite queen had died. And the king just broke down. The Buddha saw that and he asked him, “When has it ever been that something that has been born does not age, grow ill, and die?” This is the nature of the world. It happens all over the place. It’s good to think about that when a death comes near. And the one hand reminds you that you’re not being singled out for something unusual. And the grief you have can be turned to compassion as you think about all the people in the world who’ve suffered a loss. You see them walking up and down the streets. They’re everywhere. People carrying a loss around. And that transmutes your grief into compassion. Which is a more uplifting and more useful emotion. But before you get there, you do have to think about the particularity of this particular loss. And here the Buddha recommended to the king that there can be eulogies, gifts, listening to wise sayings. As a way of expressing grief, expressing your appreciation for the person who’s passed away. There are some strange thoughts out there that the Buddha would not have you grieve over loss. That’s not the case. Our aunts don’t grieve, but then our aunts are our aunts. Those of us who are not there yet have to give some expression to our grief. Otherwise we carry it around. So there are traditions in Buddhist countries that you give gifts to the monks and dedicate the merit to the person who’s passed away. Or you take on some extra precepts and then dedicate the merit to the person who’s passed away. Or you meditate. When you meditate, you dedicate merit. Try to be really strict with yourself that you’re going to make your mind one as much as you can. Because the values of the mind are, in some ways, they’re inverse to the values of the world. In the world, the more things you have, the better. Or the mind. It’s not the case that the more thoughts you have, the better. Actually, you want to get the mind centered around one thought. Think of a rare fruit in the market. There’s only one example of that fruit. It’s going to have a really high price. If there are lots of them, sometimes you can’t sell them in time. They just go rotten. They get thrown away. Our thoughts are like that. When there’s one really good thought, it has a lot of worth, a lot of value. So try to make your mind as one as you can with the breath. And from the radiant thoughts of goodwill, to the person who’s died, to all the people who have died today. And that way you can help the others at the same time as you’re soothing your own young mind. It’s good to listen to wise sayings. To help put things into perspective. To remind yourself that as long as there is still craving in the mind, it’s going to be subject to these things. Aging, illness, and death. Separation. You have to start thinking about the fact that you’re going to go too someday. Are you ready to go? There’s a textbook in Thailand that talks about the different ceremonies that are conducted. It divides ceremonies into two types. Those that are auspicious and those that are inauspicious. I wonder, what’s an inauspicious ceremony? Anything connected with death. Now that’s a Brahmanical attitude. The Brahmins feel that death is polluting. And you have to have all sorts of chance to protect yourself when you encounter death. But the Buddhist attitude is actually expressed in a sutra. The Buddha says if you see a corpse, reflect on the fact that your body is of the same nature. Someday it’s going to be like that. That gets you to thinking, one, about the value of your attachment to the body. And then two, what is your mind going to have when it has to leave the body? You want it to have good qualities. As the Buddha said, when you survey your mind and you find there’s anything in the mind that’s unskillful, you should have the same attitude as a man whose turban is on fire or his hair is on fire. You get all your mindfulness and alertness and put all your efforts into putting out the fire. So when greed comes up, think of it as a fire in the mind. Anger, delusion, these are fires in the mind. It’s one of the reasons why the Buddha chose Nibbana as the name for the goal. Fires in those times were believed to be an expression of the fire element. Whichever was provoked, it would latch on to its fuel and then be agitated and hot. But when it could let go of its fuel, then the fire would go out, return to the fire element. The same way when the mind is attached to greed, aversion, and delusion, it’s going to burn. But when it can let go, then it’s freed. Notice, the greed and aversion and delusion don’t latch on to us. We’re the ones latching on to them. And when we let go, that’s how we’re freed. So when you think about this, then any ceremonies around death become auspicious. As the Buddha said, heedfulness is an auspicious sign. So as the Buddha told the king, once you’ve expressed your grief, then remind yourself you do have work that needs to be done. If there’s no work in the world outside, there’s still plenty of work inside the mind. And that’s always worth doing. And the good thing about that work inside the mind is when you do it, you’re not the only one who benefits. You can dedicate the merit to others who have passed away. You can spread goodwill to those all around you. Because you’ve trained your mind to be less oppressive to itself and less oppressive to others. As you lessen the greed, aversion, delusion in your mind, the people around you are less subject to these things. And that’s a gift right there.

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