Skills for Dying Well

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One of the Buddhist’s most important teachings is on the topic of becoming. The Pali word is bhava. It’s a process that happens in the mind. Like everything else, it’s rooted in desire. And then around that desire, you develop a sense of the world in which that desired object is going to be found. And then you take on a role in that world. That act of taking on the role that’s called birth. It happens all the time in the mind. Anytime you think of something you want, you think about where it is and what you have to do in order to get it. And in that particular becoming around that particular desire, anything that’s relevant to the desire is part of that world. Anything that’s not gets put aside. This is a process we go through day after day after day, many times in the course of a day. It’s the mind’s instinctive reaction. You want something? Well, where is it? And what do I have to do to get it? And then you go into it. And as long as you’re interested in it, you’ll be part of that world. Then you decide maybe you don’t want it anymore. Or you find that you’re stuck in a bad world and you want to destroy it. Then you move to something else. One of the Buddha’s main insights was that this process that happens in the mind is also the process that leads to rebirth on a large scale. You can’t stay in this body any longer and something will appear to you. Many times, many things will appear to you. You focus on one and then the world disappears. The place in which that thing is located appears and then you go in. And going in, that’s how you’re reborn. You can imagine when someone’s dying, they may not be especially careful about where they’re going to go. All kinds of different emotions can come up at that time. And under the weight of some pretty bad emotions, you can make some very bad choices. Some people start remembering things they did in this lifetime that they’re not happy about. Or they realize that they did horrible things. And the fear that they might get punished for that actually opens the way to the punishment. And so people end up choosing things that they really don’t want, but they feel they have to go there. That’s one way in which we get reborn in some pretty bad ways. Other times we’re just desperate. We’re desperate for sensual pleasure of some kind. We’re not stubborn to think about what’s going to be involved in attaining that pleasure. We want to take on a certain identity. You’re afraid that this identity you have here is being wiped out. You don’t know how you’re going to function without an identity, so you want to take on a new one. You don’t want to be annihilated, to have had enough of this world. It’s nothing but pain and disappointment. And the opportunity just to get snuffed out for a while appears. You go for it. These are the big three types of craving that the Buddha said lead to suffering. Now, they lead to suffering not only at the moment of death, but in daily life. So you want to get some control over this process. You have to meditate. Look what you’re doing as you’re focusing on the breath. You want to settle down. That’s the desire in which this becoming is going to form. And here you’ve got your sense of the body as you feel it from within. That’s the world you’re going to be focusing on. And then you’re the meditator in that world. There you are, a state of becoming. But it’s a good one, because you get to observe it. It’s good in the sense that it’s transparent, because you’re settling down, making the mind quieter than it usually is. So you’re going to see things you didn’t see before. It’s also good in the sense that it’s totally harmless. Be confident you’re doing something good here. Putting aside thoughts of sensuality, you’re inhabiting the body from within, what the Buddha calls form. You’re trying to do it in a way that’s comfortable. So with the breath, you’re talking to yourself about the breath. You focus on perceptions that lead to a sense of ease inside. The perceptions about how the breath comes in, goes out, where you are in relationship to it. So you can see these processes as they’re happening. The more quiet you are, the more you’re going to see. Because the pleasure here doesn’t have to depend on sensuality. You’re not making yourself a slave to sensual pleasures. Some people say we’re not supposed to have a physical sense of well-being and concentration, because concentration is supposed to be divorced from sensuality. Well, the pleasure of form is very different from the pleasure of sensuality. Sensuality, of course, is your fascination with thoughts about sensual pleasures. The pleasure of form is something else, how you feel the body from within. That doesn’t have all the drawbacks of sensuality. So you’re lifting the level of your mind as you make it quieter. And then, of course, there are going to be other potential becomings beginning to appear. The breath is not comfortable, you can’t figure it out. And the mind says, “I want to go someplace else.” There you go. There’s a desire, and then there’s a sense of where that “someplace else” is, and you go into it. It’s like a little thought bubble, and then you float away. And then the bubble bursts, and you’re back down here. Well, you don’t like being back here, so you float away again. But you want to watch that process and not get into the bubble. That’s why we have this larger and more stable, more clear, and nobler sense of becoming with the concentration. Because it gives you a good place to stay anchored. So you can watch these other things coming and beginning to form. And you’re not so tempted to go into them, because you’ve got something better here. So you have to work on making this a good place. That’s why we talk about how you settle into the body in the present moment, and there are pains here and there are pains there. Don’t focus on the pains. Focus on the parts of the body that you can make comfortable. Because you want a place where you can feel good staying. Not be tempted to just float out after any thought that comes through. Whatever thinking you do, make it centered around the breath and the mind’s relationship to the breath. And as you get more and more stable like this, then you can really clearly see these processes as they would float away and you want to go someplace else. But you can pop the bubble. In other words, you see the process before they become a real becoming. That’s what dependent arising is all about. It tells you all the steps that the mind goes through. And Chan Chah made the comment one time that the steps happen very fast. It’s like falling out of a tree. You may go through past several branches on the way down to the ground. But because you’re going so fast, it tends to be a blur. But as you get the mind more still, things begin to slow down. This is a point that John Lee makes. Either it’s because you get quicker or things get slower. But whatever the case, you begin to see these steps more clearly. And you can decide, “I don’t want to go there.” And you do this because you’re getting the mind settled through mindfulness, alertness, and being ardent in doing this well. These are precisely the skills you’re going to need at the moment of death. You have a sense of well-being that you create in the mind. And you don’t feel so pushed out by the body. Because that’s the paradox of doing breath meditation. You’re focusing on the body as you feel it from within. But after a while, the sense of the body begins to get more subtle. And the outlines of the surface of the body begin to disappear. You get more and more just into awareness. We have a sense of being independent from the body. And that’s a skill you want to develop. Because there you can see even more clearly what’s going on. It happens when the breath stops. When you get the mind really concentrated, the breath energy fills the body. And the body will just stop breathing. Not because you’re forcing it. If you force it, it’s not going to stop. It’s not going to last. When there’s a sense of the breath energy filling the body, and that it’s originating from within, you don’t have to pull it in from outside. Then the affairs of the mind become more and more clear. And that sense of awareness itself becomes more clear. This is where you really can see these other states of becoming as they begin to form. And you don’t have to go for them. Or you see that some of those thought worlds are actually worth entering into, because there’s something that has to be thought through. Then you go in. But you go in knowing what you’re doing. This is precisely the set of skills you’re going to need at the moment of death. Because different thought worlds will appear. And they could potentially be places to actually be reborn. And depending on the state of your mind, as I said, you can go to some pretty bad places. But if your state of the mind is good, and you have this strong sense of the mind or awareness being separate from the body, you don’t feel so much pushed out by the body. You don’t feel so threatened by being pushed out. And you’re less likely to want to latch on to anything that would pull you down. Because you know you’ve got something better here. So as you develop our mindfulness and alertness and ardency, and trying to get the mind to settle down to create a sense of solid stillness, we’re actually developing the skills that we need as we go from one life to the next. So we make good choices. Our problem, as the Buddha said, is we don’t understand the consequences of our actions. That’s because the principle that explains how one action can lead to a different result is pretty complex. Some of the things we’re experiencing right now come from our present actions. Some of them come from actions we may remember. Some of them come from actions we don’t remember at all. And it’s really hard to sort that out. Which is why people make a lot of mistakes in choosing what they want to do and where they want to go. But again, as you get the mind more firmly established here, you can begin to see these processes as they happen. And you can see where you can put a stop to them. At the very least, you can choose a better state of becoming. Ideally, you want to get to the point where the mind doesn’t go from becoming at all. But failing that, you want to be quiet enough and alert enough so you can genuinely see that when you make a choice of where to go, it’s going to be a good choice. So you want to keep this in mind. That’s the function of mindfulness. And you want to be alert to what you’re doing. And you want to be ardent in doing it well. These are the skills you’re going to need. And these are the skills you’re working on right now. The Ajahns like to talk about this. They said, “Meditation is preparing yourself to die well.” There’s a skill there. A lot of people, when death comes, they just kind of surrender. Or else they go down kicking, but without really realizing what they’re doing. You want to learn how to watch what you’re doing right here, right now, and have a strong sense of what kind of choices are good, what kind of choices are bad, which voices in the mind you can trust, which ones you can’t trust. All of these are good skills to have. So we’ve got the rest of the hour. Good time to work on them. Because right now is always the best time to work on these things. They say in the Canon, “Death comes without forewarning, without a sign ahead of time.” Some people are sick for a long time, and they just won’t die. Other people look perfectly well, seem to be perfectly well, and they’ve got to go. So we don’t know how much time we have left, but we do have this time right now, this breath coming in, this breath going out. So make the most of it.

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