Death & Separation Are Normal

January 8, 2020

Take a survey of your body. Try to sit in a balanced way. Notice if there’s more tension in one side than the other. See if you can relax it. Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the process of breathing in the body. Wherever it’s most prominent, focus your attention there. Wherever you seem most sensitive to how the breathing feels, focus there. Then ask yourself, “Is it comfortable?” If it’s not, you can change the way you breathe. Talk to yourself about the breath. Ask if it could be longer, shorter, faster, slower. How would it feel if it were deeper or more shallow? Experiment to see what kind of breathing feels good, and then try to maintain that sense of well-being. You may find that the needs of the body will change, so you have to change the way you breathe. If there are parts of the body that you can’t make comfortable, then don’t pay attention to them right now. Focus on the ones where you can. It’s like going into a house where some of the floorboards are rotten. If you’re going to lie down, you don’t lie down on the rotten boards, you lie down on the good ones. You need this place of well-being inside. You need to learn how to protect it. Because we live in this world, we depend on strength of body and strength of mind. Strength of mind also comes and goes, but the difference is that you can maintain strength of mind even when the body is weak. One of the main enemies of strength of mind is the whole horde of unskillful thinking that can come in. We live in a world where there’s aging, illness, death, separation, as we reflected just now. Aging is unavoidable. Illness is unavoidable. Death is unavoidable. As the Buddha said, “No one can arrange so that something that’s subject to death is not going to die.” Separation is going to happen. We have to learn how to live with these things but not suffer from them. And a lot of the suffering comes from the way we talk to ourselves about them, our understanding, that weakens the mind. So we provide this spot where the mind can rest, gain a sense of well-being. And at the same time, we have to learn how to look at our thoughts to see which of our thoughts are causing trouble, which of these thoughts are going to destroy our inner strength, and then reflect in opposing ways, like that reflection just now. It’s meant to help you gain a sense that when death or separation come, you’re not the only one. And this is not the first time it’s happened to you. It’s happened many times. You’re not being singled out for anything especially extraordinary. The Thai translation of “death is unavoidable” is “death is normal.” Separation is normal. And in the sutta where the Buddha recommends that people reflect on these themes every day, he doesn’t stop with just the fact that I am subject to these things. He has you go on to think that all beings, no matter where they are, are subject to these things, no matter where you might be reborn in the universe. This is going to be aging, illness, and death. It’s going to be separation. And it’s gone on for a long, long time. A lot of times when this happens, it’s because you’re reflecting that the Buddha was comforting people who were grieving from loss. That’s one of the first things he would say, is, “Reflect on the fact that this has happened to everybody. It’s happened for many times.” That reflection helps you to step back a bit from your own loss, sense of loss, either loss that’s already happened or loss that is about to happen, and not take it so personally. This is a theme throughout the Buddhist teachings, that we suffer way too much by taking these things personally, thinking that for some reason we’ve been singled out for some peculiarly extraordinary pain, where it’s actually very ordinary. When you think about how universal this is, it can give rise to a sense of loss that’s a compassion. Think of all the suffering beings in the world. Compassion is a good way of dealing with this sense of loss. The mind may need to step back a little bit, but at the same time you’re not denying the loss, but you’re seeing it from a larger perspective. The question then is, what can be done to soothe the pain? There’s a case where King Pasenadi lost his favorite queen. He learned the news while he was in conversation with the Buddha. He broke down and cried. After the Buddha reminded him about the universality of loss, he said, “When you see that something good is done by expressing appreciation for the person that’s gone—and this applies also to people who are about to go—go ahead and express the appreciation.” In other words, we don’t deny the pain of loss. We don’t deny that whatever the relationship was had its good features. You want to focus on those good features and express your appreciation that the person hasn’t died yet. This is a good time to talk to the person. You don’t want to have the regret afterwards that there are things you wish you had said to comfort the person, but you didn’t say them. If the person has passed away, then it’s good for you and it’s good for the people around you to show appreciation, to show gratitude for the goodness that that person had. But then there comes a point, the Buddha says, where this gets self-indulgent, and you realize there are still good things to be done in the world. We take the sense of loss very personally because we’ve incorporated that other person into our sense of our own identity. It’s like that person is being ripped out of us. You have to remind yourself that there is still goodness in the world. There’s still the opportunity to do good in the world, even though that person is gone. There’s a case where a Sariputta passed away, and another brought the news to the Buddha. The Buddha said, “When Sariputta passed away, did he take virtue away with him? No. Did he take concentration? No. Did he take discernment? No. Did he take release? No. Did he take knowledge and vision of release? No. Good things in the world are still there. You have to remind yourself of that. And then the work that needs to be done, the good work that needs to be done, is still there to be done. So you can do that work dedicated to the person who’s passing or who’s passed away. And keep realizing that the best work of all is for the mind to develop a sense of inner fortress where it acknowledges loss but doesn’t have to suffer from it. Now, that requires that the meditation go very deep, deeper than just concentration, deeper than just discernment. You have to go all the way to release to realize that there is a dimension that the mind can touch where there is no loss, there is no separation. There is no change at all. It’s only at that point that there is no pain whatsoever, there is no suffering whatsoever. In the meantime, we work on understanding that this is universal. It’s gone on for who knows how long, as the Buddha said, the tears you have shed over the loss of a mother. are more than the water in the oceans. The tears you’ve shed over the loss of a father are more than all the waters in the oceans. The question is, how much longer do you want to shed those tears? He said if you reflect on this, it motivates the mind to look for release. So what we’re doing right now is developing part of the skill that’s needed for that release to get the mind in concentration, to gain a sense of well-being, and also gain some insight, gain some discernment, so we can talk to that part of the mind that takes issues of aging, illness, death, separation, and stabs itself with them. That’s what we have to do. We have to defend ourselves against those thoughts that weaken the mind. So we work on this inner strength. It, too, needs nourishing. It, too, is conditioned. So you have to work on it. But it will lead you to a place where there is freedom from conditions. That’s the Buddha’s promise. And he was not the sort of person to make vague and empty promises. He had tested the path and found that it worked. And in the many generations since then, other people have tested the path and found that it works. Here it now comes to our generation, and we have the opportunity to make the most of [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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