Virtue & Right View

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At the moment of death, the Buddha said, you will want to have two things. One is good actions you’ve done in the past and right view. The good actions you’ve done in the past, of course, develop good habits, and also they create good opportunities. This is why the precepts are so important. You want to avoid anything that would pull you down. And when the Buddha talked about the different kinds of loss that can happen, he said loss in terms of the precepts is really serious. Loss of your relatives, loss of wealth, loss of health. These are minor. You can think of all the other minor losses in life which seem so major. When you look at things from the larger perspective, they would count as minor, too. When you step back and realize we’re all headed towards death, and death is a big wild card, we’ve got to prepare and make sure that we hold on to things that are really valuable. Let go of things that aren’t. The other thing you want, of course, is having right view. That doesn’t mean just thinking right view, but it means acting on right view as well, because right view is part of the path. One of the unusual features about the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path is that they contain each other. The Four Noble Truths contain the Eightfold Path as the fourth noble truth, and the Eightfold Path contains the Four Noble Truths as one of its factors. Right view is making an important point. On the one hand, the Four Noble Truths show you why the Eightfold Path would be a good path to follow. If we take things down to mundane right view, why it’s good to develop skillful qualities and to abandon unskillful ones, the fact that the Four Noble Truths are part of the path means that they’re part of a path that goes to a goal that lies beyond them. So in the case of what happens at death, right view is there to point you on to a good rebirth, to remind you that your actions are really important, and you’re doing other things to get in the way of looking after the actions of the mind. Particularly, you don’t want to have doubt get in the way. How do we overcome doubt? By working on our own skillful qualities, seeing that regardless of what’s happening outside, what other people are doing, what the world is doing, the big issue is what the mind is doing. It really can make a difference. Things outside can be really shitty, but you don’t have to have that in your mind. It’s also possible that things outside can be really good, but if your mind is in bad shape, it doesn’t really mean much. So you’re trying to work on the qualities of your mind. You begin to realize that if you can let go of unskillful qualities, what the Buddha identifies as unskillful qualities, the mind is a lot lighter. This is very important. It’s part of the teaching on shedding, you may remember. One of the attributes of the Dhamma is that when you practice it, it leads to shedding rather than to accumulation. In other words, you don’t accumulate old grudges, you don’t accumulate old revenges, you don’t accumulate pride. You learn how to shed it, because those things really are going to be obstacles. You want to come to the present moment where the sun says, “I want to do this well, and I don’t want anything to get in the way of my doing it well.” That’s the message of right view. And at the moment of death you really want to do it well. Some people just give up at that point. They may say, “Well, maybe there’s a higher power that will take care of things.” Other people say, “Well, it doesn’t really matter. Everything’s going to end in nothing.” They just want to be blotted out. As the Buddha pointed out, that desire to be blotted out leads you to another rebirth, and not a very good one. There’s something that comes as a result of your views. So you want to hold on to right views as a means to something better. Ultimately, of course, they lead beyond simple good rebirths. When you handle the moment of death really well, you don’t have to be reborn at all. But it’s not like being annihilated. That was the Buddhist great discovery. By letting go, we actually find a greater wealth. By letting go of our identity, letting go of our idea of who we are, we find something that’s just too big for who we are to encompass. Something big, something limitless, something beyond shelter. There’s something the mind can attain. There are cases in the Canada where people may have not lived that good a life, but they were able to get their acts together right at death. In both cases, when the Buddha announced that this particular person had become a street murderer at death, people who had known him or her said, “Wait a minute. It sounds like anybody can become a street murderer.” Well, not anybody will maintain right view at the moment of death. When pain comes on, when delirium comes on, you need to have something you can hold on to. It’s very easy to let go of right view at that point and wallow in delirium. Self-defeating ideas, which would limit your range of action. So as you look at what you have in life, what are the things that you can depend on? What are the things you really don’t want to lose? Make sure you don’t lose your virtue, don’t lose your right view. That kind of loss, the Buddha said, would be serious. And try to live a life where you develop these as best as you can. Because even those people who didn’t totally have their act together until the moment of death, it’s not like they were total losers or totally away from the practice, as a matter of their practice being imperfect. But they still had, as the Buddha said, they still had conviction, they still had persistence, mindfulness, some concentration, some discernment. And, of course, the more you have, the better. And here’s your opportunity to develop those qualities. Try to make the most of it. Because if you lose this, you find yourself grasping onto other things that will not be able to help you. It’s like having a lifesaver when you drift in the ocean and yet you let go of it and just hang on to whatever things that might actually pull you down instead of keeping you buoyed up. So whatever sacrifices have to be made to continue in a life of virtue, in a life of right view, see them as small. See virtue and right view as things you cannot let go of, because they have a major importance both in life and as you go into death.

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