Fear Around Death

March 29, 2023

The Buddha said there are four reasons why people fear death. One is fear that they’re going to have to leave their sensual pleasures behind. The other is fear that they’re going to have to leave their body behind. The third is the fear that if they’ve done anything cruel or heartless in this lifetime, anything that’s harmful to others, there’s going to be punishment after death. And the fourth is not knowing the true Dhamma. What that means is really being unsure about what’s going to happen after death. There’s a fear of the unknown. The Buddha said you can overcome those four fears with awakening. But you can work on them even before you gain awakening. Work on chipping away at them so you can face death with a lot less fear. And these four correspond to three of the hindrances. So when you’re working on getting the mind into concentration, you’re working with the hindrances, getting past the hindrances, you’re getting some practice in getting past fear of death. So it’s not just that you’re getting the mind into concentration, you’re learning some discernment. The first two fears have to do with sensual desire as a hindrance. And this you overcome by looking at, one, the fact that the body’s not all it was made up to be. Your attitude toward the body, your hanging on to the body. It’s not really all that necessary. But if you can get the mind into the formless states, then you realize, okay, there’s still an awareness that doesn’t have to depend on the body, and you can loosen up some of your attachment to the body. But if you find yourself lusting for somebody’s body, remember the Buddhist antidote, which is contemplating the body, to see how it’s not all that beautiful after all. You take off the skin and what have you got? Nothing you could look at. Just think of your eyes. You take away the eyelids. You’d have these two globes staring at you. It’d be pretty disgusting. And you go through all the different parts of the body inside, and you realize there’s not much there that’s worth holding on to. You use it as a tool as long as you’re alive. One of the main uses of the body as a tool, of course, is to get sensual pleasures. So you have to see if the sensual pleasures have their drawback. The quest for sensuality places you in a lot of danger. You’re dependent for your happiness on things that are largely not under your control. The world outside has to be just a certain way for us to have sensual pleasures. Think about society breaking down. Not totally breaking down, but just getting more and more malfunctional. And you realize how difficult it is. You have to maintain that attitude that everything is safe and sound and you’re secure in your sensual pleasures. So you realize you’ve got to look for your pleasure someplace else. The Buddha didn’t say that all sensual pleasures are bad. He said that the beauties of nature are nourishing for the mind. The pleasure of living in a harmonious community is really useful for the mind. But there are a lot of pleasures out there that give rise simply to more greed, aversion, and delusion. And those are the ones you’re doing better to give up. So have some sense of the pleasure that can come from concentration or something better. You can look at sensual pleasures with a lot less hunger. When there’s less hunger for them, then the fear of losing them gets a lot, lot less. As for the fear of punishment that comes from things you’ve done in the past, that comes under anxiety, restlessness and anxiety, you realize you’ve done unskillful things. The Buddha said in cases like that, feeling remorse is not going to undo what you’ve done, but you simply recognize that that was wrong. In other words, you develop right view. Whatever view led you to do that unskillful thing, you realize you’ve got to abandon that view. Whatever view said it was going to be okay or it wouldn’t matter, that’s something you’ve got to abandon. You develop the right view that this really was a mistake, and you don’t want to repeat that mistake. And then the Buddha encourages you to develop goodwill. In fact, all the brahmaviharas, for all beings. You’re a self, so you don’t beat yourself up over the mistakes you made in the past. Extend it to the people you harmed, and then everybody else that you might have reason to have encounters with. Everybody you meet with. You want to make this your default mode. So goodwill for everybody. When you see someone’s suffering, you want to have compassion, regardless of who they are. You see people who are already happy, and you feel empathetic joy, again, regardless of who they are, whether you like them or not. And then you realize there are cases where you can’t be of help. You want someone else to be happy, but they just can’t happen. Or you run into problems inside yourself that you simply can’t manage at the moment. We have to develop equanimity for the time being. Notice that “for the time being.” It’s not that you’re permanently indifferent. Sometimes you realize, “There are things I can’t do right now, but maybe sometime down the line I will be able to do something.” You leave that option open. And if you’re going to have these attitudes and act on them, that pulls you out of a lot of anxiety. You have to remember what the Buddha said about the results of past karma. You may have done unskillful things in your life, but it doesn’t mean that you have to go to a bad destination. The only few actions that the Buddha said would inevitably take you to a bad destination would be killing your mother, killing your father, causing a split in the Sangha, killing an arahant, causing a Buddha to bleed with malicious intent. As long as you haven’t done any of those things, there’s no need that you would have to go to a really low level. Instead, you focus on your goodwill, your right attitudes and your right view, and doing positive things for other people in terms of being generous, being virtuous, based on that goodwill. Then you don’t have to go to a bad place. Goodwill doesn’t totally wipe out the bad karma that you did. It helps put you in a better situation where you can deal with it, face it, and not be totally overwhelmed by it. And then finally, not knowing the true Dhamma. You don’t really know the true Dhamma for sure until you reach stream-entry. You realize that what the Buddha taught is true. There is a path of practice that you can follow, and it leads to something deathless. And deathless is so ultimately happy that there’s no comparison in your ordinary sense of realm. But before you get to that part, you can cultivate conviction—conviction in the Buddha’s awakening, conviction in the Buddha himself as a person, the kind of person he was—extremely honest, extremely observant, extremely wise, compassionate, pure. And the Dhamma we’re practicing is the Dhamma that was found by that kind of person. So in a sense, there is rebirth, and it’s based on your actions. The more you can cultivate conviction in that principle, the less you’ll be afraid of what’s going to happen after you pass away. So those are fears that you want to overcome. They come from a sense of being powerless, not knowing. You’re being afraid that things are going to be taken away from you no matter what you do. And so they can be overcome as you deal with these hindrances. Chip away. You don’t totally overcome those fears, but you make them more manageable. However, there’s one kind of fear, the Buddha said, that’s actually skillful to develop. In Pali, the term is uttapah. It’s a hard term to translate into English. I usually use the word compunction, but conscience and concern are also offered as possible translations. It’s basically fear of doing something unskillful. Now, this is the kind of fear that actually comes from a sense of power you have within your abilities to shape your life, to make decisions that will have an impact on your life. And this kind of fear is fear that you’re going to abuse that power or misuse that power. Either intentionally or unintentionally, that kind of fear, the Buddha said, is worth cultivating. He actually lists it as one of the inner treasures. It’s one of the strengths that get firmly established in the mind of someone who’s had the first taste of awakening. And that can be the motivation for dealing with the other hindrances that might get in the way when you pass away. One is ill will. There are people who, as they’re passing away, look back on their lives and they remember the injustices done to them, and they focus on that. And then they die with that attitude. Well, it’s going to take them to a bad place. This is why the Buddha gave you that image of the bandits cutting you up with a two-handed sword, cutting you up into little pieces. He said even in a case like that, you should have good will for them. Because you don’t want your mind to slip into ill will. So here again the Brahma-viharas come in. Good will for the bandits, good will for yourself, good will for all beings. And your motivation, of course, is that you realize that if you allow yourself to fall into ill will, you’re creating danger for yourself. This is what compunction teaches you. Good will and the other Brahma-viharas are not called human viharas. Our good will tends to be partial, limited, as human beings. We have good will for the people we like, people we love, people who treat us well, or people who treat those we love well. And ill will for people who abuse us or those we love. That’s the normal human attitude. You’ve got to lift the quality of your mind. If you want to be safe. Because otherwise, if your goodness depends on other people being good, this is a bad place, this is a dangerous place to be. You want to be able to generate that energy of good will inside, from within, regardless of conditions outside. Because you realize that if you allow yourself any ill will for anybody, you’re creating danger for yourself. You’re going to start treating that person in a harmful way. And then you’re going to be harmed by your lack of skill. As for the other hindrance, drowsiness. Of course, when a person is dying, it’s hard for the body to be strong. But the worst thing is that when they start giving you medicines to treat pain, they basically put you to sleep. When that happens, you lose a lot of control over what’s going to go on in your mind, which is why it’s good to develop a resilience to pain. You don’t need such heavy medicines. This is why we sit and meditate and deal with pain, learn how to analyze the pain, how it relates to our awareness, how it relates to the body. See how our perceptions are creating trouble around the pain. Basically, see how bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication is creating trouble. Learn how to deal with the pain more skillfully. That way, as death approaches, there are the pains of illness, the pains of the body malfunctioning. You won’t be needing so much in terms of painkillers. That helps you to be more alert, because you really do want to be alert when you go. So again, that’s something that your compunction teaches you to fear. And it’s a skillful fear. So not all fear around death is bad. The really useful fear is not the fear that comes from a sense of powerlessness. It comes from realizing that you do have some power in your actions, and you’d be afraid to misuse it. But that kind of fear leads you to do skillful things and also gives you the attitude that you’re more in control. You’re not simply on the receiving end of things. You don’t just give up. You see what you can do. And if you can talk yourself into seeing this as a challenge that is to be met, rather than a problem, then you’re using your mental abilities in a wise way, in a way that actually will be helpful. When fear of death comes up, you’ll be able to deal with it. So you don’t start making choices out of desperation. And you take counsel with your sense of compunction. You really do want to do your best. You have to be reborn. You want to be reborn in a place where you can practice the Dhamma and keep on practicing the Dhamma. So keep in mind that death is not the end. It’s something we’ll have to meet with. You also want to be able to come out well on the other side, to develop whatever skills you can that will help you in that direction.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2023/230329_Fear_Around_Death.mp3>