Meaning in the Face of Death

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There was a famous poet at the beginning of World War II who wrote a poem that ended, “We must love one another or die.” Years later, when he collected the poem into his collected poems, he changed the line to, “We must love one another and die.” That’s the sort of insight that comes with experience. It’s not that love will prevent death, but that we have to keep on treating one another well, in spite of the fact that we’re all dying. As the Buddha said on the evening after he had abandoned his desire to continue living, rich and poor, young and old, wise and foolish, all end up dying. He said we’re all like clay pots. Whether they’re fired or unfired, they’re going to end up broken. But we shouldn’t let that fact get us discouraged. After all, we’re dying all the time. I’ve had quite a number of students and other people I’ve heard of recently been diagnosed with fatal illnesses, and some of them get discouraged. They realize they have to keep on living. They’re meeting their duties as they can, but it’s hard, thinking of their own death. This is why the Buddha teaches us to think of death in another way. As he says, “With each breath you should tell yourself, ‘This could be my last breath. I can do something good with it.’” So even if there’s been a diagnosis of a fatal illness, that doesn’t change the fact that we’re all going to die anyhow. It simply puts a time limit on it, or gives you a specific disease or condition that you might die from. And of course, you never know if you’re going to die before something else. But we have to keep on doing good, doing what’s right, because there is a sense in which that poet’s first line was right. If we change it from love to “be heedful,” as the Buddha said, “The heedful don’t die. The heedless are as if already dead.” In other words, our life doesn’t have much meaning. But if you’re heedful, you can actually find something worth inside. Even if you don’t get to the deathless in this lifetime, you can build good qualities. And you can do that with every in and out breath. As the Buddha noted, all skillful qualities are rooted in heedfulness, the realization that we suffer or we find happiness based on our actions. So we have to be very careful about how we act. This is the wisdom that’s based on the teaching of karma. That actions do make a difference, and they come from within us. It’s not some outside power acting through us. It’s not inevitable that things will have to be a certain way. We take the raw material coming in from past actions, and we can shape something good out of it. If we couldn’t, heedfulness would not be useful. It would be superfluous. It’s not activity or attitude of mind, but it is the essential one. Just as all prints of all the animals that walk on the earth can be fit into the footprint of the elephant, all skillful qualities fit into heedfulness. So even when you’re feeling weak or feeling old, or death seems imminent, remember that the time you have right now still has value. One of the worst things we can do is let the facts of aging and illness and death make us hopeless, despondent, thinking that nothing matters. Each breath can matter. Each intention can matter. The simple fact of trying to focus on something good, that in and of itself, is a meritorious act. When you see the mind slipping off into something that’s unskillful, bringing it back is a meritorious act. Because the goodness we do doesn’t disappear. The bad things we do don’t disappear either. So you want to make sure that you get the most out of each moment. The moments pass away, pass away. There’s a passage someplace in the Pali tradition that says, “Time eats itself as it eats up all living beings.” So when the moments are going to get eaten up, anyhow, get something good out of them that doesn’t get eaten up. All too many people think, “Well, I’m going to have some good memories. I sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, time with people.” But those memories are going to pass. It’s the quality of what you do for yourself and for other people that matters. There’s a phrase, “Love one another and die.” Love isn’t quite the right word. I know there are some people who would like to translate metta as love, but the reasoning largely has to do with just pleasing people. But as the Buddha noticed, love in and of itself is not a reliable emotion. It usually grows with attachment. And when there’s attachment, you can do all kinds of unskillful things. As the Buddha says, if there’s someone you love and someone else treats that person well, you’re going to love that second person. If they treat the person you love poorly, you’re going to hate that other person. If there’s someone you hate and someone else treats that person well, you’re going to hate that person. If they treat that other person poorly, you’re going to love that person. Which is all pretty arbitrary. So love can’t be relied on as a basis for a universal emotion, a universally good emotion. Goodwill, though, is different. Wishing for happiness, realizing that true happiness comes from within. The true happiness of one person doesn’t have to have any negative impact on the true happiness of anyone else, which means you can extend that as a universal attitude toward all beings without any conflict. If nothing else, try to develop that attitude. When you’re sick, when you’re feeling weak, it’s good to take your mind off of your particular illness, your particular ailments, and just think about, “May all beings be happy.” It lifts the mind from simply being a victim of what’s happening to the body. And there’s more good that you can do. Go ahead and do it. There may be limitations in terms of your physical strength, your physical abilities, the time you have left. But as the Chamahabhara once said, “Try to squeeze as much goodness as you can out of this body before you have to throw it away.” Because there is goodness in here. The fact that we have the body with consciousness means that we can think all kinds of good things. We can try to bring the mind to stillness so that it can observe itself, because it does have that quality. The Buddha called it “luminosity inside,” which is basically the clarity with which we can observe ourselves, pass judgment on our actions, and decide what would be a better way to act. So when we think about aging and death, it’s good to think about things that don’t become meaningless because of aging and death, and devote ourselves to those things. Find meaning in those things, because they can lead to a happiness that goes beyond aging, goes beyond illness, goes beyond death. This is the whole point of the Buddhist teachings. As he pointed out in the vicinity, everybody dies, even our ancestors. They have to put down their bodies. But the verbs he uses, the description of death, is something different. It doesn’t say that they’re subject to death, simply that their bodies are subject to laying down, subject to breaking apart. The implication being that they found something that’s deathless, that doesn’t die. It’s not subject to breaking down, to falling apart. That’s where we’re headed. Whether we get there in this lifetime or another lifetime, that’s not the issue. The important thing is we keep focused in that direction, because the universe as a whole is pretty meaningless. But we can choose to give our lives meaning each time we breathe in, each time we breathe out. We’re going to take one step. Toward the goal that really does have meaning for us.

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