Ready for Death

September 29, 2023

We have that contrast in our chants, again and again. We chant about being subject to aging, illness, and death, separation. And then there’s a chant of goodwill starting, “May I be happy. May all beings be happy.” And the true chants define the Buddhist picture of what our practice is about. We have the reality of aging, illness, and death, and we have the wish for happiness. It was that wish that motivated the young prince, back 2,600 years ago, to find some way of not suffering from aging, illness, and death. You can’t deny them as facts. They happen again and again and again. But his question was, “Is there a way to experience them and not suffer? And even better, is there a way not to have to experience them at all?” That was what he found. This is why we take refuge in him. It’s on occasions like this, when there’s been a death, that you begin to realize how precious that refuge is. Because death can be startling. It happens in a moment, even when there’s been a long buildup, a long illness. There’s a moment when the person is alive, and then the next moment they’re gone. Even more so in a case like Shota’s, when nobody expected it. She didn’t give any hint of any premonition. Her physical symptoms were there. She admitted that she had some vertigo, but you don’t die of vertigo. Then she’s gone. Of course, that makes us reflect on how quickly it could happen to us, too. That’s a lot of what’s scary about death. You live your life. You have your plans. You have your expectations. You have a sense of security, however secure or insecure it may seem. But there’s that basic sense, “Well, I’ll just keep on living.” Then it stops. It can’t stop at any time. So we’ve got to be prepared. This is one of the ways in which we take refuge in the Buddha. He teaches us how to train our minds so that when death comes, we’ll be better prepared to handle it—the death of other people and our own. There’s a custom in Thailand where they divide rituals into two types. There are auspicious and inauspicious rituals. The inauspicious ones have to do with funerals and death, making merit for people who’ve passed away. But the concept that these are inauspicious is not a Buddhist concept. It’s pramanical. From the Buddhist point of view, when you see someone who’s passed away, the proper response is heedfulness. One, being heedful in how you react to that person’s death, not letting it shake you up so much that you start doubting in the goodness of life, the opportunities offered by life. You can also handle the thought of your own death and prepare for it. You can prepare in two ways. By doing good in terms of generosity, virtue, meditation, creating opportunities for good places to go, but also working on the skills that you’re going to need at the moment of death. You’re sitting here meditating, and you want to stay with the breath. Any other thoughts that come up that would wander away and lure you to wander away, you have to say no. You have to learn how to say no effectively. This is for the sake of your concentration right now. And you’re going to need concentration at that moment, too. As the Buddha said, our rebirth is determined by our cravings. And if we can crave a life where we can practice the Dhamma, that’s a good craving to have. But if you allow vagrant thoughts to come wandering in and pull your cravings away, who knows where you’re going to go. It’s like a tornado coming and sucking you up and depositing you someplace else. It’s something that you didn’t expect or didn’t want. So this is another part of refuge. The Buddha teaches us these skills that we’re going to need. Because the reflection on death is not simply, “I’m going to die someday.” It could happen at any time. Because after all, you could react to that reflection in all kinds of ways, many of which are unskillful. But the skillful way is to realize that the shape of your mind is going to determine where you’re going to go. So you better get your mind in good shape. Develop these skills of mindfulness, alertness, and urgency, so that when the unexpected happens, when that moment comes, you’ll be prepared. You’ll know what to do. As the Buddha said, our reaction to things that make us suffer is that it tends to be bewilderment. And when we’re bewildered, we’re unprotected. We don’t know what to do. So this is the Buddha’s gift—having a strong sense of what should be done and how to do it. This way, if death comes at any unexpected, sudden moment, you don’t have to fret about how the narrative of your life hasn’t reached a proper closure. Just remind yourself, “I’ve got the skills I need.” This wasn’t expected in the narrative arc. But you can pull out those skills and do something good with them. So the Buddha’s advice is to, one, end your bewilderment, and two, give an answer to what can be done so as not to suffer. We learn that it’s important that we act in ways that are for our own well-being and for the well-being of others. This is where the practice of dedicating merit comes in. We do good, and then we dedicate the merit to those who have passed away. There’s a passage in the Canon where a Brahmin comes and asks the Buddha about the merit that we’ve made for our ancestors. Do they actually receive it? He says, “If they’re in a position where they can receive it, yes.” The Buddha lists the hungry ghost as the position where it can be received. But there’s a tradition throughout the forest tradition that it’s not just hungry ghosts that benefit. Anyone who has a way of knowing that merit has been done and dedicated to them, and if they rejoice in that, they appreciate it, that becomes their merit too. It’s that sense of being lost and bereft when someone dies, especially when someone dies suddenly like this. You’ve got to remind yourself, you’ve got the Buddha as a refuge. You don’t just crawl up in his lap and hide out there. You have him as a refuge in the sense of giving you an idea of what can be done so you don’t have to suffer, and what can be done so you don’t have to be plagued with thoughts of how meaningless everything is. The Noble One said that dying is simply like changing one set of clothes for another. And in doing so, it doesn’t make meaningless the good that you’ve done. It simply means that it can get carried on in a new role. This is why taking a rebirth as a working hypothesis is an important part of the training. The things he learned in the course of his awakening were like the leaves in a forest. What he taught was just a handful of leaves. So when he talks about the three knowledges he gained on the night of his awakening, apparently that wasn’t all he learned in the course of his awakening. Remember, he continued contemplating and enjoying release for seven more weeks afterwards. I don’t really know what else he learned in the course of that. But he made sure to mention that his knowledge of rebirth and knowledge of why and how people are reborn was part of that handful of leaves. So it wasn’t just an idea he picked up from his culture. There were people in his time who did believe in rebirth, but there were people who didn’t. And even among those who did believe in rebirth, there were lots who didn’t believe that your actions had anything to do with it. Either what you were was permanently determined. In other words, if you were a Brahmin, you were going to be reborn as a Brahmin. No matter what you did. If you were a dog, you were going to be reborn as a dog, no matter what you did. All those who said you went up and down, but just in a totally random way. So then the Buddha pointed out his understanding of rebirth. He was actually making an important statement that this is a necessary way of viewing things so as to end your bewilderment and to keep you protected. This is what refuge is all about. It gives protection. It protects us from our bewilderment. It protects us from all the wrong ideas and wrong actions we can do out of fear of aging, illness, death, out of fear of loss and separation. I’ve noticed in Thailand, when I was there, that the Ajahns who’d been in the forest and confronted lots and lots of dangers are the ones who seem to be most convinced and have the strongest sense that the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha really do offer refuge. That’s when you confront the facts of life like this. That’s when you realize how precious this refuge is. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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