

To Practice Dying

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It's common teaching among the forest ajaans that when we meditate, we're practicing how to die. The skills you learn in meditation are going to stand you in good stead when life comes to an end and you move on. The question sometimes arises, who are you who's moving on? It's not a question the Buddha addressed. The same with, "Who are you who's meditating?": We don't need to ask that question before we meditate. We just sit down and follow the instructions. You don't have to define yourself as to whether you're an enlightened being trying to remember your enlightenment, or an unenlightened being trying to enlighten yourself. Those aren't the issues when you meditate. The Buddha has you focus on what you're doing and the results of what you're doing.

The same principle applies when you approached death. He doesn't talk about what dies, what gets reborn, or what goes in between, aside from explaining the process by which it happens, and focusing specifically on what you're doing. What happens at death is very much the same as what happens in the process of distraction while you're meditating. You have an intention to stay with the breath, and other thought worlds pop up. If you're not careful, you go with them. The popping up of a thought world is like the process of what they call *bhava* in dependent co-arising; going into the thought world is like birth.

So that's what you've got to watch out for. Where do these thought worlds come from? They come from clinging, and clinging comes from craving. In fact, there's one sutta where the Buddha says that craving is the medium leading from one life to the next. It's the sustenance, the thing that's clung to as you go from one life to the next. Most people at that moment place all their hopes on their craving. They suddenly find they can't stay in the body any more, and the whole thing's falling apart. As one meditator once said, it's like a house on fire. There's no place safe place inside that you can go when the house is on fire. You've just got to get out. This is why many people, when their houses are on fire, jump out the window without even thinking about where they're going to be landing.

Most people die the same way. They just jump. Anything that comes along, they jump for it. What we're learning to do here as we meditate is how not to jump. There's another alternate. You don't have to stay in a burning house but you also don't have to jump. At the very least, if you're not completely awakened, there is one place you can go: You can go to the element of space.

One of Ajaan Fuang's students, an old woman, was sitting and meditating one night in a group meditation in Wat Asokaram. A voice came into her ear as she sat down to meditate: "Tonight you're going to die." So she thought to herself, "Well, if I'm going to die, I might as well die meditating." And sure enough, she said, it was as if the elements in the body were falling apart. It was like a house on fire: Earth, water, fire, wind—none of them were anywhere you could stay. But then she thought of space, so she focused on the space element that permeated everything. Space was not on fire. So she hung out in space for a while, and as her focus shifted back to the elements of the body, she found that the body had gone back to normal. So she hadn't died. That's how she lived to tell the store.

When she mentioned her story to a number of ajaans, they said, "Yes, if you have no other place to go, go to the space." It's a good, safe place to hang out. Even though it's still an attachment and a form of clinging, still it's a lot better than most of the things that come up.

My own experience of almost dying came when I was electrocuted. A lot of images suddenly came up in the mind when I realized I couldn't move. I was probably going to die from my own stupidity for not having checked the electricity. Then all of a sudden I remembered, "Hey, I've been meditating all this time. I'm going to have to learn how to use my meditation skills. This is what they're for." So whatever the vision that came up—regarding the fact I couldn't say goodbye to my father, my family, regretting the things I hadn't yet accomplished in my life—I said, "I can't go there." These visions would come, and I just said, "No, no, no," and they would fall away. Then the connection that had me electrocuted was cut. So I didn't die. I'm here telling you the story.

But it's interesting watching the mind at that point, because the people who saw me being electrocuted said that it happened in the snap of a finger, whereas for me it felt like several minutes. Your mind spins really fast when you realize the body can't move, you can't do anything with this body, you're going to have to get out. It looks for all kinds of alternatives. A lot of alternatives will pop up, and you need the mindfulness not to go with them.

So this is why we practice developing mindfulness, developing alertness, so that when distractions come in the course of the meditation, we know enough how not to fall for them. Now, if it so happens you're going to have to be reborn, at least you can choose a good place to go.

But it's also good to develop skills that don't get you pulled into things that look good but are not going to be good. This is one of the reasons why we practice analyzing the body into its 32 parts.

There's one tradition that you sometimes hear in the Buddhist world, that a person who is about reborn sees his or her future parents having sex, gets attracted to one or the other, and zoom, goes down, gets into the womb. It's probably one of the reasons why the idea of your parents having sex grosses you out for the rest of your life. This is one of the reasons we practice analyzing the body to 32 parts. No matter how attractive the body may be, it's good to realize that rebirth in the human realm is not all that happy. No matter how attractive it may look on the surface, you've got to remember that there are all sorts of ugly things lurking beneath. This is one way you can take apart the image that might appear as you're about to leave the body.

It's also good to reflect on karma. Different images may appear, but it's not the case that just because something appears, you've got to go with it. Again, it's a lesson you learned in the meditation: Just because a thought comes into your mind doesn't mean you have to complete the thought or find out where it goes. Just let it go wherever it wants to go in its vaguely formed condition.

The same with these images that are going to pop up at death: You don't have to get into them. Say a bad image appears, and you think: "Oh my gosh! All those bad things I did in my life. I really am going to go to hell." Don't fall for that thought, because you've got good karma as well. This is why it's important to remember the principle of karma, that we have lots of different karmic potentials. We don't have to go with the bad ones. Try to nourish the good ones. You can do that even at death if you've practiced as you meditate.

The Buddha doesn't answer the question of what dies and what gets reborn. As he often says, it's an inappropriate question, just as inappropriate as to ask who's meditating? You've probably heard that old question: Hey, if there's no self, who is meditating?

Remember, the Buddha never said there is no self, he never said there is a self. When he points out the drawbacks of different self-theories, he says, if you really look at what you identify as you or yours, you don't see that it's proper to hold any of the possible self-theories. He doesn't say that you look at these things and conclude that there is no self. Those are two very different conclusions, and it's important that you see the distinction between the two. Instead, he has you focus on what you're doing, the results of what you're doing, and particularly on the results in terms of the stress or ease, the pain or pleasure that comes from what you're doing. The doing is always primary in the Buddha's teachings. You look at the list of dependent co-arising, the doing, i.e., *sankhara*, comes up first, right after ignorance. The being, *bhava*, comes quite a bit later. Doing is primary; being is secondary.

So focus on what you're doing and learn how to do it well, because the skills you develop here are the ones you're going to need at the moment of death. You're not going to need to know the theory of what dies and what gets reborn, but you will need to know how to handle the process skillfully. That's what we're working on. These skills of staying with the breath, suddenly finding yourself someplace else, and being able to pull yourself back: With time, you see the process of slipping off and realize you don't have to go along with it. That's an important insight in the meditation. While you stay right here, you can actually see a mental current flowing out of the mind. In the past you've always flowed along with the current, but if you're able to stay still while the current goes, you see the current doesn't go very far if you're not running along with it. Or as Ajaan Mun would say, you're not singing along with it.

So it's always a question of what you're doing, not a question of who you are. There's that one sutta, where the Buddha says, when you really focus on things as they are arising and passing away, you get to the point where the seeing how things pass away, the notion of their existence doesn't occur to you. As you see them arising, the notion of their nonexistence doesn't occur to you. Those concepts you just put aside. But you hold onto the concepts related to realizing that your actions have results, and you can learn how to do the action skillfully. That way, the skills you develop here are going to see you through all kinds of difficulties in life, all the way through death.

So focus on mastering them well, so that instead of having willy-nilly to place your hopes on craving, you can place your hopes on the skills that come from being mindful, alert, knowledgeable, seeing things in terms of the four noble truths: In other words, you put aside the ignorance, the sole troublemaker that causes all the problems to begin with. As meditators, we may be ignorant of other things, but as long as you're not ignorant of the four noble truths—i.e., as long as you can see your experience in terms of these four noble truths—you know all you need to know.