

Heedful of Death

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Greek philosophers used to say that thinking about death is the beginning of wisdom. It's what makes you stop and think about life, and to seriously examine your life. But just thinking about death on its own is not enough to give rise to wisdom. Some people arrive at the attitude of "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die," as if that were the best way to spend your time in the light of death. Wisdom requires more than just thinking about death. It also requires thinking about your potential as a human being, your potential for happiness, where that potential truly lies, and what you can do to get the most out of it. As the Buddha pointed out, it is possible, through your actions, to find a true happiness. Your actions have a huge power to determine the type of happiness and the type of pain that you meet with in life. And your choices do make a big difference.

Reflecting on this fact is what gives rise to heedfulness, and heedfulness is actually what gives rise to wisdom. You realize you have to be careful in what you do, say, and think, because if you're careless, you can create a lot of trouble, both for yourself and for the people around you. In fact, heedfulness is the root of all skillful qualities. It's because we're heedful about the potential dangers and the potential opportunities that are opened by our actions that we develop good qualities of mind. We realize that this is a good use of our time: that even though we may not know what the future holds in store, we do know that if we've developed our powers of mind—powers of mindfulness, alertness, ardency—these skills, these powers, when developed, will help us in any situation.

That's one of the reasons why we're here: to work on developing these powers. As you keep the breath in mind, you're developing mindfulness. As you're trying to focus on what's actually happening with the breath, and on whether the mind is staying with the breath, that's the quality of alertness.

Ardency, however, is what actually develops these things. In other words, as soon as you've noticed that you've slipped off the breath, if you're ardent you'll come right back. If you're not ardent, you'll notice, but you'll just wander around and look at the flowers, look at the butterflies, and after a while say, "Well, maybe I should get back to the breath." It's good that you get back, but the whole point is to get back more and more quickly. Because it's in those gaps in your alertness that important things are going on in the mind.

The mind does have a tendency to place a curtain over its workings, like the wizard in *The Wizard of Oz*, who likes to hide behind the curtain as he manipulates the machinery. Once the curtain is stripped away, it destroys the illusion. But the mind likes to engage in illusions. It builds thought-worlds that don't seem totally real unless you can close off your awareness of how the thought-world was built. It's in those gaps of alertness that the actual machinations of fabrication are going on, so those are precisely the things you want to see. So as soon as you realize you've slipped off the breath, come right back. And you learn several things. You'll learn how the mind slips off and what it's doing in the middle of the time when it's slipping off. You learn important lessons about the workings of the mind.

Ardency also means that while you're with the breath, you try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breath is going in the different parts of the body. As you breathe in, where do you feel the energy flow? Can you sense any tension or tightness or blockage in the flow? If you do, what can you do about it? Sometimes just being alert to it is enough to disband any tension. Other times, you have to work things through more carefully.

Try to develop the ardency that's willing to stick with it and be patient. If one approach doesn't work, you try another. If you can't go directly through the blockage, well, try to circumvent it. Or if there's a pain in one part of the body, and focusing on the pain or trying to bring the breath to the pain doesn't seem to help, bring your focus to the breath to the opposite side of the body. Or you may notice that some parts of the body are doing all the work in your breathing, and they're doing it for the sake of other parts of the body, while they themselves feel starved. So give them a chance to breathe just for themselves. Say, let your shoulders do the breathing, but the breathing only has to go into the shoulders for the time being. See what that does.

In other words, you use your ingenuity. This is an important part of ardency: that you don't give up when one approach doesn't work. You try new ones. In this way, you develop mindfulness, your alertness, and your concentration. You develop your discernment so that you can bring all these qualities not only to issues of the breath, but also to other issues in life as well.

This is one of the advantages of getting the mind still like this, and balanced in the present moment. It's in a more impartial space. You can drop your regular narratives for a while and just work on the processes of the mind, so that you can begin to notice when you start picking up other issues in life—such as the issues that normally come when someone in the family dies, or someone you know well dies. You can look at the issues, and you can also look at the mind as it's dealing

with those issues, but you can look at it from a position, at least a little bit, of detachment. That way you can observe more clearly, and more all-around, what's going on—and why it's suffering. When the mind is still and clear and balanced like this, it can ask itself questions, pose questions, and get a more balanced answer.

Now, there's no 100% guarantee that every answer appearing in a quiet mind is going to be reliable. But it's more likely to be reliable than if the mind is just running around. When the mind is really still, it can face the questions that we usually don't like to ask, make observations that we don't usually like to make, but are important.

There's a passage where the Buddha recommends that when somebody dies, you reflect on the fact that your body, too, has a similar fate. It hasn't gone beyond that fate. You can do this either to gain a sense of detachment from your body, or a sense of perspective on time: You don't know how much time you have left. In other words, it's good for heedfulness. And you can ask yourself: When you yourself are going to have to face death, what skills are you going to bring with you? Because it is possible to die without suffering, but it requires strong mindfulness, strong alertness, and a good understanding, where you're able to separate the mind from its objects, separate it from its feelings, perceptions, thought constructs.

There's a famous passage where Anathapindika, who has long been a supporter of the Buddha, is on his deathbed, and Ven. Sariputta and Ven. Ananda go to see him. Sariputta tells him, "Try to detach your consciousness from sights, from sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. Detach it from the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind." He goes through a long, long list, even to the extent of: "Detach your consciousness from the consciousness of these things." In other words, anything that comes up as the object of your awareness, you try and let it go, let it go, let it go. Anathapindika, even though he had been supporting the Buddha for many years, had never had the opportunity to listen to a Dhamma talk like this. He started to cry. Ananda thought he was losing his grip, but Anathapindika said, "No, I'm not losing my grip. It's just that after all these years, only now am I getting to hear a Dhamma talk like this." So he asked Sariputta to tell the Buddha, please give this Dhamma talk more often to lay people.

The point being that the most important skill you can develop is the skill that's able to let go. Whatever appears in the mind that's causing any kind of weight or concern, you're able to let it go. This may sound irresponsible, but it's an important skill that you need to develop, even as you negotiate the issues of every day life. If you carry all your responsibilities around with you all the time, the

mind is going to wear out. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, its goodness begins to break down if it tries to carry too much.

So when you have responsibilities, you have to learn how to put them down, even if it's only temporarily. For the time during which you put them down, you want to be able to leave them alone and not anticipate that you're going to pick them up again. Just stay with the sense that while you're here, they're put down. This gives the mind a chance to rest and can stand up straight.

You can compare this with the coolies who work on the ships in Bangkok and carry huge bags of rice, bags of other things, on their backs as they go up and down the plank, off the ship and onto the shore, and off the shore back onto the ship. Because they spend so much time walking around with burdens on their backs, they tend to walk bent over, even when the burdens are not there. You don't want your mind to be like that. You want it to be able to stand up straight—every now and then, at least—so that it can remember what it's like to stand up straight, and how good it feels.

So it's an important skill while you're here with the breath, that you want to be able to let go of everything else.

And then when you work with the breath to the point where the breath stops, and you can let go even of the breath. Just be with the awareness in and of itself that remains. It may be an awareness of space, an awareness of consciousness in and of itself. If you have to hold onto something, well, hold onto that for the time being. But it's possible to let go of even those things. This is the skill that will see you through.

The reason that people suffer as they get sick, and suffer as they die, is that the mind will latch onto something that, in many cases, is pretty random. It has to do with their past karma, things that suddenly pop up at that moment. And because the mind is weak and feels threatened, it'll just latch on because it's not used to not latching on to anything. When your awareness can't stay with the body, it's going to grab at anything at all if it hasn't been trained. But if you learn how to let go, you realize you don't need to hold on to anything. It's not like you're going to fall down anywhere.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has you practice at the skill of reminding yourself that when it's just awareness in and of itself, there is no up, there is no down, there's no inside, there's no outside, there's just awareness. Up, down, inside, outside: Those all have to do with the body, with physical reality. But when the mind is able to let go of those things, it doesn't need to have those coordinates. It's like going into outer space. The concepts of north, south, east, and west have no meaning in outer space. They have meaning only in reference to

the Earth. In the same way, when you let go of things, you don't have to be afraid that you're going to fall anywhere, you're right here. And if your good qualities of mind have been developed enough, that'll be sufficient.

So the meditation is a progressive process of letting go, letting go, of peeling things away, peeling things away. But to do this, on the one hand, requires the heedfulness that motivates the practice, and then the good qualities you develop as a result of the heedfulness: wisdom, purity, compassion, mindfulness, alertness. These are things that have a real solid worth that you can hold onto in the meantime.

So when you think about how little time you have left, and how little time we all have left, heedfulness is what reminds you these are the things you want to develop, these are the things you want to give most of your time and energy to, because they give the greatest rewards.