

How to Think about Death

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The mind seems to spend all of its time in thinking. As soon as we learn how to put words together, the mind just keeps churning out words. The mind can churn out all kinds of words, words that are helpful to us, words that destroy us, words that make us happy, words that make us miserable. One of the most important skills we need to learn is how to turn off thoughts, or at least how to choose the thoughts we're going to focus on. Even when you meditate, there's going to be some thinking. Just the bare thinking of breath, breath, breath, or when you're evaluating the breath, or just staying with the perception of breath, there's some thought going on. But at least it's useful thinking, helpful thinking.

Some traditions tell you that you've just got to learn how to stop thinking, period, and that's going to be the end of the problem, but that doesn't help. The issue is learning how to think, when to think, what kind of thinking is helpful, what kind of thinking is not—so that your thinking, instead of being destructive, can actually be constructive. Like that chant we had just now: For most of us, when we we're thinking about death, it makes you miserable. Life is going to be cut off. You have no idea when. We'd like to think of our lives as having a nice narrative arc, coming to closure. But most people's lives are just torn off. They seem to be going someplace and then the narrative just gets ripped to shreds.

Fortunately, death is not the end. It may be the end of a chapter, but it's not the end of the book. In fact, the book keeps on going and going and going. And the characters keep coming back again and again and again.

For most of us that's a question: Is there going to be life after death? For the Buddha, it was something he

knew, without a doubt, that there would be. And it's helpful to trust him on this issue because it helps put things into perspective, like that reflection just now on aging, illness, death, and separation. These are things we normally don't like to think about. But the Buddha says there's a way to think about them that's actually helpful. In fact, he has you think about them often, every day, every day, every day.

The first four reflections—on aging, illness, death, and separation—are meant to focus you on that fifth reflection: "We are the owners of our actions. Whatever we do for good or for evil, to that will we fall heir." That way, when you think about death, immediately think, "What am I doing? What can I do that's going to be of long-term value, both for myself and for the people around me?" That's a skillful use of this thought.

Thinking about death is good for focusing you right now. In fact, the Buddha said you want to think, each time you breathe in, "I've got this one breath. I don't know about the breath after this, but at least I got this one. What's the best thing I can do with this breath? What would be a skillful action? What would be a skillful thought? What would be a skillful word?"

This kind of thinking keeps you focused. If you see any unskillful thoughts coming up in the mind, remind yourself that you can choose not to follow them. You can see that if they're destructive, they take away your energy, they're not a good use of your thinking. You can use those verbal fabrications to focus back on the breath, ground yourself, and say I've got this breath, what can I do with it?

In fact, it's because of death that we focus on the present to begin with. The Buddha never talks about focusing on the present because it's a wonderful moment, or that it's the Eternal Present. Instead, every time he talks about staying focused on the present it's because there's work to be done in the present. And if you don't do it now, you can't be sure that you'll get it done in time before death comes—because when death

comes, that's when you'll really need the skills that meditation develops.

One of the most important of those skills is learning how to direct your thoughts, direct your attention, to what's of value. After all, there is something of extreme value, supreme value that the Buddha teaches: total release from suffering. It's something we can do, and whether we reach it in this lifetime or a future lifetime, we can work in that direction. It's the heartwood of the teaching.

An image that's very common throughout the texts is of a person looking for heartwood, something that's of real value, something you can really gain benefit from. And the Buddha said the heartwood of the teaching is release, freedom from suffering, freedom from stress. That's the only thing of real value. Everything else has value to the extent that it relates to that. All the skills we develop—and it is important to regard meditation as a skill—are aimed in that direction.

So this first skill you learn as a meditator: You direct your thoughts to the breath and you try to put aside any interest in wandering away. Of course, pretty soon the mind will be interested in wandering away, and you've fallen for it. When you notice that, you come back. You want to learn from that. You want to learn the right lessons from that.

Some people learn the lesson, "Well, the mind is totally out of control, it's not self, and so much for that." They never learn anything. What you can usefully learn is that the mind has lots of different intentions. And just the fact that you set up a really good intention doesn't mean that it's going to stay there. You've got to learn how to protect it. The Buddha talks about mindfulness as a governing principle. And the basic task of mindfulness as a governing principle is to look for areas where you could develop more skill, and work on developing those skills. In areas where you already have some skills and some good things in the mind have developed, you learn how to protect those. It's

interesting. He says to “protect them with discernment.” That’s what the text says.

So it’s not just a matter of watching things coming and going. You realize that there are some things that you want to make come, you want to make them arise. And you want to prevent them from passing away. Other things, unskillful qualities, you want to keep from arising, or—if they’ve arisen—you want to make them pass away. So you have to identify what’s really of value in the mind, in the heart. This is a training. It requires discernment. You work on these qualities so that you can attain the heartwood that you want.

As he says, release is not only the heartwood, but also it’s the flavor of the teaching—he used the word *rasa*, which also means “nourishment.” There’s something of real value here, real nourishment here, so you want to direct your thoughts in that direction. That’s a good use of your time, and a good use of your thinking. Because all too often people think, “Well, if I’m going to die, I might as well have a good time.” Most people’s idea of a good time tends to be going for whatever pleasure suits their fancy. But that’s not harmless.

As the Buddha said, feelings are mental fabrications. They shape your mind. And you have to look at the kind of feelings you’re going for. What kind of pleasures do you go for? How do they shape your mind?

Some of them seem relatively noble, but they can also entail a lot of suffering. Some are not noble at all, just plain old sensual pleasure: nice sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. But as Ajaan Suwat often liked to ask, your sensual pleasures from last week: Where are they now? They’re gone, gone, gone. They keep going, going, going and we keep looking for more and more and more. We forget to look at the state of mind that gets developed as we’re hungering after those sensual pleasures, what kind of person we become, totally wrapped up in things that keep slipping

through our fingers. We don't see how the pursuit of these pleasures is shaping us.

As the Buddha said, even if we had showers of gold coins it wouldn't be enough for one person's desire for sensual pleasures. It wouldn't keep us full of pleasure. So you've got to look for feelings that shape your mind in a skillful direction. The pleasure that comes from getting the mind to settle down; the pleasure that comes from mastering a skill; the pleasure that comes from knowing you've tried your best at something: Those are all very different from just nice pleasant feelings.

After all, what do you have that's of real value, that you can take with you? You've got the qualities of the mind. The pleasures you can't take, but you can take the qualities of mind that are developed through feeling and perception. So you want to fabricate those feelings and fabricate those perceptions in a way that's going to lead to good states of mind, good qualities of mind, like the perfections.

What you can actually take from your life is basically what you put into it, what you build into it. You build these qualities of mind. There's generosity, there's virtue, there's renunciation—the ability to step back from sensual pleasures and find a higher level of pleasure in a concentrated mind—discernment, persistence—your powers of endurance—truth, determination, goodwill, equanimity. These are things of lasting value. They might not be as hard as the hardwood of release, but at least they're not just twigs and branches. They're the softwood of the tree, and the hardwood needs to be protected by softwood.

All these good qualities can go with you. And they're not something you're just taking with you. As you develop these qualities, you leave behind a really good example. Your ability to take care of the mind is one of the best gifts you can give to the people around you. I've seen many people, as they approach death and their minds are totally out of control and they're

making themselves suffer. They get to a point where you can't reach in and help them at all. Either they can't hear you, or they're delirious, or, who knows what. And it really hurts to watch them make themselves suffer in this way.

But if you can learn how to get your mind under control, you're giving a real gift, not only to yourself—in that you're not suffering—but also to the people around you, who don't have to watch you make yourself suffer. So think about that list of the perfections.

Generosity, virtue, renunciation: Look at your life and see to what extent you're developing these qualities and what opportunities you have to develop them.

Discernment, persistence, powers of endurance: There are opportunities to develop these things all the time.

Truth, when you make up your mind you're going to do something and you stick with it. *Determination:* You

make vows to focus on what's really important to you.

Goodwill for all, *equanimity* in the face of the things you can't change.

The word *parami* is usually translated as perfections, but it's related to the word *para*, as something that leads beyond, or *paramam*, something of foremost importance. These are your real accomplishments in life, because they don't end with just this life. They're accomplishments that are a gift not only to yourself, but also to the people around you.

So when you find you're thinking going off in destructive ways remind yourself that there's a better use for your thinking.

Many people come to meditation thinking that they've already learned how to think. They went to school and they learned all kinds of good ways to think. They don't need to be taught how to think any more. They need to be taught how not to think. But that's not really true. School teaches us how to think about certain things, but it doesn't teach us how to think properly about the big issues in life. And sometimes the

more education you have, the dumber you get about the big issues.

There's a phrase in Thailand: The more you study, the more stupid you get; the bigger you get, the more naive. We learn how to think about all kinds of things except for the important issues in life: how to face aging, how to face illness, how to face death, how to face separation, how to order our priorities so that we can really focus on what's important, i.e., what we're doing right now. What kind of actions are good for creating good qualities in life? What are the important things to try to accomplish in life? We have to learn how to think about these things in the proper way, because that can save us a lot of suffering and save the people around us a lot of suffering as well.

So as Ajaan Lee used to say, meditation is not just about not thinking, it's also about learning about how to think in a really skillful way: developing both the quiet mind and the properly thinking mind. Those are the things needed to get to that heartwood, the thing that's of ultimate value.

There was a time shortly before Ajaan Suwat's passing away, when I visited him in Thailand, and he was talking about how his brain was beginning to malfunction. He said it was giving him all kinds of weird perceptions. But he had developed the skills of mind to recognize that these were weird perception. He didn't say that, but that was one of my things I noticed. After saying that his mind was giving him weird perceptions, he stopped for a second, and then he said, "But that thing I got from my meditation, that's still there. That doesn't change."

We hear that, and they're inspiring words, but hopefully there'll be the day when we can know that thing for ourselves.