

As Days & Nights Fly Past

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There's a question that the Buddha has us reflect on every day: "What am I becoming as days and nights fly past?" The Thai translation of the passage is: "Days and nights fly past. What am I doing right now?"—which may not be quite literal, but it gets the same point, because what you're becoming is based on what you're doing.

Look at your actions as you go from day to day. Where does your mind gravitate? What things do you tend to think about? What habits are you developing? If you see they're heading in the wrong direction, quickly try to change.

Think of the Buddha's image of the person whose head is on fire. You stir up all your relentlessness, your desire, your mindfulness to put out the fire. It's one of those passages that shows that mindfulness doesn't mean simply accepting things as they are. It means keeping something in mind, keeping the important things in mind—in this case, realizing that you don't know how much time you have.

Death is going to come at some point for all of us. We don't know when, but you've got to be prepared at all times, because it can come quickly. It's not the case that everybody has a long disease that lets them know, "Well, this is it," so that they can say their farewells and straighten things out in time. Sometimes it sneaks up on you and suddenly kidnaps you, and you want to make sure that your mind is in a good state of becoming when that happens. Again, that's based on what you do, what you say, what you think.

So look at yourself. Are you heading in the right direction? Are you acting as if you knew you're going to die? I forget who it was that said one of the amazing things about human beings is they all know they're going to die but they act as if they didn't. Everyone thinks we've got all the time in the world. Even people who are old think they're too young to die.

But as the Buddha said, all good qualities come from heedfulness. They're rooted in heedfulness. And that's what heedfulness means: realizing you've got to prepare. After all, what's going to happen? You can't stay in the body. The mind will move on with its craving. It'll cling to its cravings.

Now, "craving" here doesn't mean simply wishing that things not be the way they are. It's more radical than that. Think about someone dying. What are they going to miss? What are they afraid of being deprived of? One of the things will be sensual pleasure, or the ability even to fantasize about sensual pleasures. So the

mind will tend to go in that direction, especially when there's pain. Most people don't see any alternative to pain aside from sensuality. That's where the mind tends to go to escape pain.

Can you resist that pull? This is one of the reasons why we have the contemplation of the parts of the body, the contemplation of all the different diseases that any body is subject to, the contemplation on the undesirability of any world that you could go to, and a sense of dispassion for fabrications, any thoughts in the mind.

So when you find that you can't stay in the body, the image the Buddha gives is of a fire leaving a burning a house going to another house. In those days they believed that the fire, to get from one house to another, would have to cling to the wind to get carried over. In the same way, the mind clings to its cravings. And you might think, "Hey, if you're going to go where you crave to go, it could be a good thing." Well, craving is blind. And like the wind, it can go any which way, especially if you have no control over your cravings. As the Buddha said, the mind can reverse itself so quickly that there's no analogy for how quick it can be. You think you're going in one direction; all of a sudden you're going someplace else. So what do you need to develop? Mindfulness. Discernment. These are the two things that will protect you.

In addition to craving for sensuality, there's craving for becoming, which is taking on an identity in a world of experience. Here, again, you're being ejected from this identity that you've held for so long. The ordinary mind can't conceive that there could be any happiness without taking on a new identity. So when opportunities come up as you're dying, you just go for them. If you're desperate—in a lot of pain, a lot of sorrow—you just grab whatever potential identity comes along.

This is why we try to develop the mind in concentration, because one of the skills you have to learn to get the mind concentrated is to say No to impulses that would have you think about other things. It's as if we have a committee inside, and not all the committee members are on board with the meditation right now. Some of them would be all too happy to use this hour to think about something else. You have to get really good at saying No, No, No, again and again and again, until those members of the committee finally realize that you're really serious, and you can settle down. View that as an important skill that you're developing as you settle down: learning how to just say No to your distractions.

Think, too, about the importance of what's going to happen at the moment of death. One of the insights the Buddha had on the night of his awakening was that we're reborn in line with our karma, and karma is not a simple thing. It's not as if

you can tally up how many good things you did, and then you subtract how many bad things you did, and then you go with whatever number you've got. Different actions can yield their results at different rates.

And then there's also just the state of your mind at death. The Buddha saw cases where people had lived good lives, but all of a sudden developed wrong view at death: thinking that what the mind did wasn't that important, thinking that actions were not important, thinking all the generosity that they had given, all the precepts they had followed, were to no purpose. If you think that, that's bad karma, and that bad karma can counteract a lot of the good you've done. It doesn't wipe it out; it just simply means that the bad karma is going to go to the head of the line.

And the other way around, people who have done lots of bad things in their life, but they suddenly get right view towards the end of the life—that can delay the results of the bad karma they would have had to suffer. What you're doing as you're dying, the state of the mind in the present moment, is an important thing.

So here we are in the present moment. It's as if we know we're going to get mugged here, so we want to check it out: How can we avoid getting mugged? Try to be really familiar with what the mind tends to do in the present moment, because that's what you're becoming right now, and threatens to be what you'll become at the moment of death. Or it could be a promise: what you could become if you develop good skills right now.

Then there's craving for non-becoming. Some people—when they have a lot of pain, a lot of misery in life—decide that they'd just like to snuff everything out. They'd like to have everything go into nothingness. That kind of craving, too, can take over at the moment of death. But as the Buddha saw, it doesn't really put an end to the becoming. It just takes you to some weird place where your awareness gets snuffed out, your perceptions get snuffed out. Then, depending on how strong that desire was and how strong your concentration was around that desire, you can stay there for a long time. When you come out, you imagine what it's like: Someone who hasn't been thinking and hasn't been receiving any input for a long time—they really have trouble as they begin to have to renegotiate life in a new realm of being.

So those are the cravings that can come at you at death. Are you ready? I know some people who object to the idea that you have to try to be as alert and mindful as possible at the moment of death. They say, "Here, the person is dying. Can't you leave them alone? Just let them die in peace. Let them relax. Don't make any demands of them." Well, it's not that *we're* making demands of them. Their own minds are making demands. If their minds haven't been trained, they won't realize

that they still have to be mindful and alert, and that their actions at that moment can really make a difference. If they just give in to whatever comes, that's not dying in peace. It may look peaceful from the outside, but who knows where they're going?

So it's not a kindness to say, "Well, just leave people alone." The kindness is to say: "Okay, even at the moment of death, you can still make a difference. You can still use your skills, because all the skills of meditation are going to be useful at that point: the ability to stay focused, the ability to detect unskillful currents in the mind and then say No, the ability to maintain your right view, that your actions really are important."

And you remind yourself: Even though you may have some bad karma from the past, it doesn't have to take over. Some people, at the moment of death, see bad places opening up, and they suddenly remember all the bad things they've done in their life. They think, "Oh, I must deserve punishment," and they just go slipping right in. But as the Buddha pointed out, that's not the case. Even though you may have some past bad karma, you can generate good karma right now.

It may be difficult if you haven't had any experience with the meditation. But if you *have* had experience with the meditation, that's the time when you want to really use your skills. As Ajaan Fuang said, when the moment of death comes, remind yourself: "Okay, this is what I've been meditating for." In English, we say we "practice" meditation. When you think about how we use the word "practice," we "practice" an instrument for the sake of performing. You practice meditation in the same way: Death is the moment when you perform.

So practice well. If you see that your habits and your state of mind are all heading in the wrong direction—well, you can change that direction. It gets harder as you get older. It gets harder as you get sick. It's possible, but it's better to learn how to do it right now. Change things in the right direction. Make that a habit. It'll be a habit you'll be glad you've developed.

But what all too often happens is that people look back on their life and realize so many areas where they wasted their time. So live your life in such a way that you won't have any wasted time to look back on. You want to look back and say, "Well, I spent my time wisely, learned skills that are going to be useful right now." Sometimes, just that thought is enough to lift your spirits.

So as the Buddha said, you remind yourself all the time, with each and every breath, "Okay, I've got this breath. I don't know about future breaths, but I've got this breath right now. Let's see what I can do in training the mind. A lot can be done." This is called mindfulness of death. It doesn't mean that you just think, "Death, death, death, death, death," all the time. It means you realize, "I've got

this present moment. I can make it a valuable present moment. I can accomplish a lot.”

So as you get older, you can still accomplish great things even though you’re old. As you get sick, you can still accomplish great things even though you’re sick. There are cases in the Canon where people turned themselves around at the moment of death and were able to gain different stages of awakening, which means that you can accomplish great things even though you’re dying.

That message is not an imposition. It’s not placing extra burdens on people as they’re dying. It allows them to maintain hope—and confidence that their actions really do make a difference even as they leave the body. That will encourage them to focus, at that moment, on the right things, and not get distracted by things that will pull them down.