

Preparing to Die Well

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There's a famous passage in the Canon where a young monk, Ven. Ratthapala, is visited by King Koravya. The king asks him, "Why did you ordain? After all, you've had a lot of wealth, you had no loss in your family, no health problems. You've got everything a young man looking forward to the pleasures of sensuality can hope for. So why did you ordain?" Ratthapala replies that he had reflected on four Dhamma summaries from the Buddha. These four summaries are mentioned nowhere else in the Canon, but they were lessons Ratthapala claimed he learned from the Buddha. One, the world is swept away. It does not endure. Two, the world offers no shelter. There is no one in charge. Three, the world has nothing of its own. One has to pass on, leaving everything behind. And four, the world is insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving.

Then Ratthapala explains them to the king. The first three he explains with reference to issues of aging, illness, and death. *The world is swept away.* The king says, "What does that mean?" In response, Ratthapala asks him, "When you were young, were you strong?" The king says, "Yes, I was strong in arm, strong in leg. In fact sometimes I think I had the strength of two men." "How about now?" The king replies, "I'm now eighty. All my strength is gone. In fact, sometimes I think of putting my foot one place and it goes someplace else." So the first summary has to do with aging. It also has to do with *anicca*: inconstancy. Impermanence. The world is swept away. Things keep changing, changing, changing all the time. And as for a body, it develops for a while and then starts to age and just falls apart.

The second summary: *The world has no shelter. There is no one in charge.* Ratthapala illustrates this with the truth of illness, and it's a truth about suffering as well. He asks the king, "Do you have a recurring illness?" The king says, "Yes, I have a wind illness"—back in those days, they believed that if you had shooting pains and cramps in the body, it was caused by a disturbance of the wind element. "Sometimes I'm in so much pain that people gather around me in anticipation of my death." So Ratthapala asks him, "Can you order the people who've gathered around you to share out the pain so that you feel less pain?" The king replies, "No, of course not. Even though I'm king, I'm not in charge of the pain. I have to put up with whatever pain there is." There is no one in charge. So that puts together the teachings on illness and *dukkha*: stress and suffering.

The third summary: *The world has nothing of its own. One has to pass on leaving everything behind.* The king says, "What do you mean? I have stores of gold and silver. So how can you say the world has nothing of its own?" Ratthapala says, "Can you take those stores of gold and silver with you when you die, or do you have to leave them behind?" "Oh, of course, I have to leave them." So the third summary has to do with *anatta*—not-self—and death.

So you see in these first three summaries a parallel between, on the one side, the three characteristics or three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self; and on the other side the three deva messengers: aging, illness, and death. Death is the big not-self teaching. There are so many things we hold onto in life that, as

death comes, we have to let go. This is one of the reasons why meditation involves so much practice in letting go, letting go, letting go: because most of us tend to hold on, hold on, hold on. And yet no matter how tightly we hold onto things, they're going to be ripped from our grasp as we die. So it's best to learn how to let go skillfully beforehand. Otherwise we'll be stuck with that fourth Dhamma summary: *Being insatiable, finding things insufficient, we're a slave to craving*. Craving is what makes us pass on to another life, where we try to latch on again.

The Buddha compared the process of dying to a flame leaping from a house afire to another house next door. In order to make the leap, it has to depend on the wind element in the air—nowadays we'd call it oxygen—as its support as it goes from one house to the next. In the case of dying, craving is the support that leads from one lifetime to the next. The Buddha doesn't talk about *what* makes the leap from lifetime to lifetime, because we're not responsible for the *what*. Instead, he talks in great detail about the act of leaping itself—*how* the process happens—because that *is* our responsibility. It's something we can see happening in the present moment, something we can understand to the point where we know how to choose not to participate in it. We can choose not to fall for it again and again, craving for things that are not really ours. This is why we have to see the world is empty, for otherwise we fall under the power of the King of Death: the desire to keep on getting reborn again. Think about that: The desire to be reborn is the King of Death, lording over our hearts. To gain our freedom, to get out of our slavery, we've got to learn how to let go.

And the letting go has to be very thorough. There's a passage where Anathapindika is dying. Ven. Sariputta comes to see him and starts telling him how to let go. First you let go of the objects of your senses. Then you let go of the senses themselves. Then you let go of your consciousness of the senses, your consciousness of what's going on in your mind, your consciousness of consciousness itself: You let go of that, too. And Anathapindika starts to cry. He's never heard this teaching before. All those years he spent with the Buddha, yet the Buddha never mentioned it to him. There's a lot of controversy in the tradition as to why this was so. But the important point is that that's the teaching at the moment of death. You've got to learn how to let go, even of your consciousness of consciousness.

What is there left? Well, that's something you find out in the practice. This is why so many of the *ajans* in Thailand refer to meditation as practice in dying: We gain practice in letting go and seeing for ourselves what's left when everything gets let go. But to gain practice in letting go, we need to do more than just let go. We also have to develop skillful qualities of mind. This is why the Buddha has four noble truths. If there were just one duty in the practice—whatever arises, just let go, let go—you'd only need one noble truth. But there are some things you have to comprehend, some things you have to let go of, some things you have to realize, some things you have to develop before you can finally let go of them all.

In terms of the developing, you work on the precepts. In one sense, this is a form of letting go. You let go of your desire to do and say unskillful things. But it's also a form of developing. You have to develop a strong conviction that the sacrifices you might have to make in observing the precepts are really worth making, that there are some things of greater value to be gained by letting go of

the pleasure derived from those unskillful activities. Without that conviction, you can't change your unskillful habits. So you've got to develop that conviction, keep it strong.

Then there's concentration, which also involves both letting go and developing. The developing involves finding a good solid center inside and maintaining it, looking after it. You work with the breath to make the breath comfortable so that it's easier to stay here, and you work with your perception of the breath so you can calm things down and make things more and more quiet inside, both in terms of what's called the physical fabrication of the breathing, and the mental fabrications that are the feelings and perceptions. Sometimes there's a perception of light, sometimes there are perceptions of beings coming to visit you, all the *nimittas* or signs or visions we hear about: You've got to let those go, calm them down, because they can be disturbances.

Back when I was studying with Ajaan Fuang, there were times when his lay students would sit meditating with him, and some of them would start having visions. He had this uncanny ability, as many of them said, that within a second or two after a vision had appeared, he'd ask, "What's going on in your meditation over there?" They'd say, "Wow, there's a vision." Then he'd tell them what to do with the vision. Of course a lot of people listening in were wondering, "When am I going to have *my* vision?" But as he explained, it wasn't because the vision was something special that he gave it so much attention; it was because it was an obstacle you had to get past. It's one kind of perception you have to let go of, to calm things down inside.

But there are also perceptions you have to develop about how the breathing process actually works in the body—especially if you find breathing laborious. If it takes a lot of effort to breathe in, much of that has to do with the perception of what you're doing as you breathe. If your perception is that all you have to breathe through is the nose, it can be very restrictive. Think instead of all the pores in your skin opening up, so that the breath can come in and out of the pores. And there are channels of breath in the body, through which things can be connected. Think of every little cell in the body being connected, every little cell. And the breath energy is just waiting outside the body to come in. You don't have to pull it in. Just open up the pores and it'll come in on its own. If you hold these perceptions in mind, they change the way you breathe. The breathing gets a lot calmer. The mind gets a lot calmer. You're calming down what are called mental fabrications.

You can also calm down the feeling side of mental fabrication as well. Sometimes there are strong feelings of rapture or thrill going up and down the spine. You get goose bumps, intense feelings of fullness as if you're going to drown. Sometimes it's very pleasant and other times very unpleasant, as if you're losing control. You start to pulsate or throb, and when that happens you're certainly not calming the mind down. So remind yourself that there are many levels of breath energy in the body. There's the gross level, which is what you're focused on, but there are more subtle levels you can tune-in to, like tuning from a radio station playing rock music to one that's playing something very quiet, peaceful, and soothing. So even though the waves of the rock station are still here in the air, you're not focusing on them. You're focusing on the radio waves coming from the station playing Arvo Pärt: quiet, calm, soothing music. It's the same with the breath, the same with the feelings that can come from the

breath. Try to tune in to the more subtle feelings of stillness and ease, of neither pleasure nor pain. Tune in to that sense of equanimity. That way you calm down the mental fabrication.

It's by holding onto these more subtle perceptions, cultivating and developing them, that you're able to let go of grosser things. Which means that the path begins by combining developing and letting go. Even though eventually we try to let go of all states of becoming, we do that first by developing a skillful state of becoming—right concentration of the mind—which gives a standpoint from which we can gain practice in letting go of grosser pleasures, grosser attachments.

The main attachments you let go when you're developing concentration are the hindrances, beginning with sensual desire. That's a big one. As the Buddha said, the reason we're afraid of death is because we're afraid we're going to have to let go of our sensual pleasures. And we *will* have to let go of our sensual pleasures. The problem is if we haven't had any practice in letting go of sensual pleasures, our craving will go straight to where we hope to find more sensual pleasures after death. And who knows where that may be? Ajaan Mun comments that, during one stage in his many past lifetimes, he got fixated on the sensual pleasures of being a dog. For 500 lifetimes he was a dog because he was stuck on that level of sensuality.

Ajaan Fuang was once visited by some people who'd been studying Abhidhamma. They had heard he was a good teacher, but they didn't know what he taught. He was there in Bangkok so they went to see him and asked what he taught. He said, "Well, sit down, close your eyes, focus on your breath." They said, "Oh no, no. We can't do that. If you focus on the breath, you'll get stuck in jhana and be reborn as Brahmas." Ajaan Fuang replied, "What's wrong being reborn as a Brahma? Non-returners are reborn as Brahmas. And at any rate, being reborn as a Brahma is better than being born as a dog."

The point he was getting at is that non-returners have gone beyond sensual attachment, sensual passion. Dogs are still attached to sensuality. And even though these people had learned Abhidhamma, had done all sorts of vipassana, they still were coming back to their sensual passions. They could be headed back to dogdom. The only way to avoid that fate is to let go of sensual passion, and the only way to do that is to develop another alternative to pain aside from sensual pleasure. Practicing right concentration is precisely what gives you that alternative, another place to go. As the Buddha once said, if you haven't found another source of pleasure better than sensual pleasure, then even though you know the drawbacks of sensuality, you're just going to keep going back to it, back to it, back to it.

So you've got two duties here: to provide an alternative to sensual pleasure and to see the drawbacks of sensuality, to see why you go there, to see that the allure of sensuality is really false and deceptive. It pulls you into doing things and getting obsessed with things that have no real value and can actually harm you. They dull the mind, make it intoxicated. As the Buddha said, this kind of pleasure is blameworthy, causes harm to yourself, harm to other people, and in addition to the bad kamma that often comes with getting involved in that kind of stuff, the mind gets dull, dull, dulled. Your vision gets restricted—because when you're attracted to something of that sort, it's usually to certain details. You focus on some things and willfully ignore all the things right next to them. You focus

on the skin and forget that just a millimeter under the skin is some pretty disgusting stuff. As you go deeper and deeper in, it gets even worse, right there in that very same body.

Then you turn around and focus on what the sensual passion does to your mind: Everything gets very dulled and narrowed down. But if you don't know anything better than the pleasure you get from that, that's the pleasure you keep going back to.

There's a story they tell in Thailand of a dog who was changed into a prince. A princess met him, fell in love with him, and prevailed on her parents to let her marry him even though they didn't know him. He looked like a prince, acted like a prince, but they didn't know what kingdom he came from. But she was really in love with him, so she convinced her parents that he was a good prince worthy of being her husband. Yet this prince, even though he looked like a prince on the outside, still had the passions of a dog. One day the princess found him in the bathroom eating shit out of the toilet, as dogs do in Thailand. So of course he was thrown out of the palace. Went back to his life as a dog.

That's a lot like what our mind is like. We go for the refined bliss of concentration for a while, then we turn around and go looking for the shit in the toilet. So you've got to see the drawbacks of those passions. They do have their allure, but you've got to weigh their allure against their drawbacks and try to develop this alternative source of pleasure so that you can have someplace to stand and can let go of that passion. As the Buddha said, when you reach non-returning, you've mastered concentration at the same time that you've been able to get beyond sensual passion. That guarantees that you're not going to go for dogdom or any of the other sensual-passion realms. But still there's more to let go of. Even though the Brahma realm is a very refined state, refined states don't last as long as the Brahmas think they do.

There are many instances in the suttas where Brahmas are totally deluded on this point. They think they've gone beyond anything the Buddha knows, so the Buddha has to go up to their Brahma heavens and subdue their pride, to show them that they still have more to let go of, that there is something the Buddha himself has gone beyond but they haven't. In one of the suttas, the Buddha challenges a Brahma, Baka Brahma, to disappear from him, but Baka Brahma can't do it. The Buddha sees him wherever he tries to hide. The Buddha then succeeds in disappearing from Baka Brahma, and states in a loud voice that he has found a level of consciousness that Baka Brahma hasn't known, that's not known through the senses, that's not experienced through sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, or ideas sensed through the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or mind. It's beyond the six senses entirely.

It's only when you hit that, that you're really safe. Which means you have to learn how to let go of all the senses.

So you try to let go first of sensuality and then of the senses entirely, the contact based on the senses, the feelings based on that contact, and then the consciousness of all these things. It's a very radical letting go. But before you can do that, you've got to develop mindfulness, concentration, alertness: all the qualities of the path. Then when the path is done, it gets let go of, too. Like having a set of tools that you use to work on the mind: When the mind has been fully shaped, fully developed, you put the tools down.

This is how we prepare for death so we can learn how to do it well. As Ajaan Lee said, most people die without any rhyme or reason, flailing around and latching onto whatever the mind happens to think of in those last moments. And it's capable of latching onto all kinds of stuff if you haven't trained it. If you *have* trained it, you have more control over it. It's the same as when you're meditating. As you see the mind flickering off to yet another thought—which develops into a little thought world, a little becoming—you learn how to catch it and stop the process more and more quickly.

Then you realize that this skill is not just a matter of mindfulness and alertness but also of your sense of values: You have to undo the desire to go into those thought worlds, to see them as interesting or worthwhile. You've got to train the mind so that it doesn't get pulled in, doesn't get hoodwinked by flashy lights and sensuous curves and all the allure of these different worlds. This is why the skill of discernment is also a matter both of developing and letting go. You have to develop the right sense of values so that you can really let go of unskillful things. As you develop this skill in your meditation, you're closer and closer to having a skill that's capable of facing death and handling it well, so that you have your protection.

Death is going to happen regardless, but you can protect your mind from dying in an unskillful way. You do that by learning to live in a skillful way in all your actions, in all your words, and in the way you handle your mind. So fortunately, learning how to die skillfully is no different from learning how to live skillfully. You cover both issues while you're here as you practice.

So try to be heedful. "Heedful" doesn't mean simply being diligent and busy with the practice. It also means having a strong sense that our actions make all the difference, and that we don't have any time to waste. We have to focus our energies on the areas that really will help us in the event, say, that a little blood clot starts getting the wanderlust, roaming through your bloodstream, wandering here, wandering there and finally—whoops!—gets lodged in your heart and that's it. Or that huge earthquake they keep warning us about: These things can happen at any time. So you've got to be prepared.

Heedfulness means seeing that there are dangers here in the mind, and it really behooves you to work on them as quickly as you can, to maintain your focus and not let it get distracted off into ways of wasting what little time you've got. You've got this breath, this breath, this breath. As the Buddha said, if you're on top of each breath, realizing, "I'm fortunate that I've got this one more breath to practice the Buddha's teachings": That's when you're counted as heedful. So don't let this breath be wasted.