

## *Fear of Death*

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When you begin meditating, the first thing you notice is not how wonderful your meditation object is. You notice the problems of pain and distraction. They constantly seem to pull you away. Actually, though, they're not pulling you. You're going after them, because the mind has made a habit of going after these things. That's the way the mind is now, and don't think it's going to be any different when you die. Those will be the two the big problems you'll face—pain and distraction—only at that point, the pain and distraction will be even more compelling.

You want to be prepared for that eventuality so that the mind isn't driven around by these things, which means you have to get practice now while you're still relatively healthy, relatively strong, and you're not seeing your life falling into pieces all around you. That way, when pain comes, you're familiar with how to deal with it, how to sidestep it, how to watch it without getting sucked into it. The same with distraction: You're able to see a thought form and realize that you're in charge. You can go with it or not as you choose.

The mind has a long-term habit of going into these things without even thinking. So the first order of business when you meditate is how not to get involved in these things at all. In other words, your constant choice is: "I'm not going there." Only when you're able to carry through with that choice consistently can you then start entertaining the other choice, which is allowing these things to come in while you tell yourself, "I'm going to watch this very carefully without getting sucked in, so that I can understand where it's coming from, where it's going, and how I can stay in the midst of it without being consumed by it, without being carried away."

In both cases, you first have to give the mind a good place to stay. This is why you work with the breath so that it becomes your natural base of operation and your natural foundation—natural in the sense that you've made it habitual. And it helps, of course, when the breath is comfortable or you can make it comfortable. After all, there is an intentional element in the breath. This is why it's called bodily fabrication. The Pali word for fabrication, *sankhara*, also carries the meaning of intention. You can intend to breathe in a comfortable way, and a lot of the skill in meditation is learning how to follow through with that intention so that you're not forcing the breath or messing with it so much that you're actually making it more uncomfortable.

Try to get the right touch as to what kind of breathing feels good, what kind of breathing feels best for the body right now. Sometimes the body needs energetic breathing; sometimes it needs calming breathing, deep, shallow, heavy, light. There are lots of different ways you can breathe, lots of different places in the body you can focus. You want to familiarize yourself both with the needs of the body and the with the needs of the mind, and how they can be met by the breath.

That's why we spent long hours just sitting here watching the breath, so that we can learn about it. Think of it as an exploration. If you think of yourself as simply being tied down to the breath without allowing yourself to think, without allowing yourself to evaluate anything, the mind is going to rebel very quickly. But you can remind yourself that it's the energy that keeps the body alive. It's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, it's the energy flow throughout the body that enables you to move the parts of the body, that enables you to sense things through the nerves: It's all breath.

Think in that way and you realize how important it is to learn how to breathe skillfully, breathe with awareness, breathe with a good sense of what the body needs. Sometimes you have to consciously direct the breath in a particular way; other times kind you can simply pose a question in the mind: What kind of the breathing would feel good right now? It's almost as if you allow the body to do its thing, and it'll find a good rhythm. Sometimes that works; sometimes it doesn't. But that's a good way to start. Just ask yourself when you watch the breath, what kind of breathing would feel good right now? And you can ask yourself: Would longer breathing feel good? and the body will respond. It'll breathe longer for a little while, and then you can decide, no or yes, depending on the condition.

There is a part of the mind that's already very sensitive to what feels good and what doesn't feel good, and you can start tapping into that. This gives you a good foundation, and when you've got a good foundation, you're coming from a position of strength. When you're coming from a position of strength, you're in a much better position to do the right thing, to make the right choices.

Working with this bodily fabrication also involves other types of fabrication. There is verbal fabrication, in which you direct your thoughts to something and then you evaluate it. So you direct your thoughts here to the breath and you learn how to evaluate it with sensitivity. Then there's feeling and perception: mental fabrication. We fabricate our feelings as well, partly through the way we breathe, partly through the way we label things, how we relate to the way we label things. When feelings come in, they do have a certain amount of raw data, but by the time they usually come to consciousness, there's already been some processing going on. There's an intentional element in that as well, but often the intention is

subterranean. It's become so automatic that you've forgotten about it. You're not paying careful attention. But here as you focus on the breath, you get more and more sensitive: What are these feelings in the body? How do you understand them? How do you relate to them? And also how does the way you label them affect them?

For instance, when you feel certain sensations that you don't like, if you just tell yourself, "Well, that's that solid leg down there," you relate to it in one way. But then if you think, "This could be breath energy, and it's breath energy that's been blocked, it's not flowing," simply labeling it in a different way opens new possibilities of how you can deal with it, what you might do with it. If it's just dead, solid feelings, there's not much you can do with it. At least you don't think there is. But if you label it as breath, breath is energy. Breath can move. It flows. When it comes up against a blockage, you can think of it flowing around the blockage, flowing through the blockage, or you can change the direction if you think you might be forcing it in the wrong direction to begin with. There's lots to play with.

So this forms your foundation. This is your basis. But when distraction comes, the first thing that happens usually is that you go back to your old habits. You get distracted. You think about this, think about that, you're in this or that thought world. Tell yourself, "Wait a minute, I'm not supposed to be here. I'm supposed to be back with the practice." So you try to drop thought world and come back, and be prepared for the fact that other thought worlds are going to come.

So be on the lookout to notice how the mind slips off. The more solidly you are with the breath, the more you're able to see this. You begin to see that there are stages in the process of distraction. There's a little stirring first in the breath energy, a little tightening someplace in the body, and then you identify that little tightening and you say, "This is a thought about  $x$ ." And then it becomes a thought about  $x$ . Then you ride with it. Well, you have choices in the matter. Try to notice those choices more and more quickly. This is the way you can begin to see some progress in your meditation as you get more alert to the mind as it's about to go off and you can catch it in earlier and earlier stages of the thought forming and the choice to go with it or not.

This way you can begin to separate yourself from this process of thought formation. This is the important point. You see these things as separate, instead of putting them on like a pair of clothes and wearing them, or jumping into them like a car, riding wherever the car is going to take you.

That's a skill you're going to need all the way throughout life, and at the moment of death it'll be very handy to be able not to jump into thought worlds,

because those thought worlds turned into actual worlds. This is the process of birth and becoming on little level, but it's how it happens in the big level as well.

This is one of the Buddha's great insights, that the world at large operates with the same principles as the little thought worlds we have in the mind right now. And the way you relate to your little thought worlds is going to determine how you relate to the world at large: the whole process of clinging, becoming, birth that goes on through aging, illness, and death. What you see happening on the micro level is exactly what happens on the macro level.

So you want to master the micro level. That's going to give you the skills and tools you need to master the macro level as well. After all, when you die, you don't want to go wherever these things may take you, because you've already seen during your life where your thought worlds go. They can go all over the place. You get on a plane and you think you're going to New York, but you end up going where? Australia, India, Bangladesh, Burma, whatever. Thoughts don't always go according to schedule or according to flight plan.

The same thing applies to the thought worlds that appear in the mind as death approaches. And particularly if it's an unpleasant thought world that's appearing, you want to be able to stay away from it. So realize that this is just a construction of the mind, because at that point when the mind is in a position where it's about to leave the body, it tends to go for these things, whether good or bad.

You want to be able to say No, so you learn how to say No now. It's a skill you can develop. This is why the Buddha focuses so much attention on the issue of death. The first reason is to remind you that there's a lot of work to be done before you go, so that you become more and more heedful about how you spend your time, because you don't know when it's going to happen. It's not the case that we all get lined up by age, and go according to age. There's no telling who in this room is going to be the first to die. So you want to prepare yourself for that eventuality. That's one of the reasons why the Buddha teaches mindfulness of death. It's for the sake of heedfulness.

The other reason is to remind you not to get upset about death or discouraged, to remind you that there is a skill you can develop right now that at the very least will make sure that the process goes well, and at the best it helps you discover something that doesn't die, so you can have that to depend on as the body passes away and all the aggregates fall away.

The same principles apply to pain. When you begin the meditation, the first step in dealing with pain is learning how not to go with it. There may be a pain in your knees, a pain in your leg, or a pain in your back, and the first stage of attack is to learn how to focus someplace else in the body, so that no matter how bad the

pain may be, you have another place to stay, a place you can make comfortable. Ajaan Lee gives an analogy of going into a house where some of the floorboards are rotten. You don't step on the rotten floorboards. You step around them so that you don't go falling through.

And the same with the body: There are going to be aches and pains here and there, so learn how to resist the temptation for the mind to go straight to the pain. There can be a pain there, but you just tell yourself, "It's not my possession, and if I don't get in the line of fire, it's not happening to me. It's just a pain there." Part of the mind will say, "No, you've got to take care of this. You've got to worry about it, you've got to do something about it." To resist those thoughts, tell them you're not going to deal with it now. "Afterwards, if I get up from meditation, walk around and the pain is still there, then I'll deal with it. But right now I'm just sitting in a posture the body's not used to, so it's normal for there to be pain." Some of the pain is actually useful. The blood is being forced into capillaries where normally it doesn't go, and the nature of the body is that if the blood is forced in that way consistently enough, over time eventually it'll start expanding those capillaries and turn them into major blood vessels.

So it's not a sign that your legs are going to be paralyzed or that you're going to harm yourself permanently by sitting here in meditation. It's only an hour. And you're actually getting the body used to this position, so a certain amount of pain is normal.

If you can learn how to ignore those scary narratives the mind builds around the pain, then it's easier to stay away from it. Once you've mastered the ability to stay away from it and develop a sense of ease with the breath, one of the things you can do is to think of the breath energy that flows around the pain. Maybe part of the pain is being aggravated by the fact that the breath energy is not flowing there properly.

Say there's a pain in your knee. Start thinking about the breath going down the back, and wherever there's a sense of blockage in your spine, loosen it up, loosen it up. Go down vertebrae by vertebrae, down to the tailbone then out the leg. Think of the breath energy flowing through the knee and out through your toes, and see what that does to the sensation of pain there. Sometimes it'll help diminish it, sometimes not. But you've got an extra tool for dealing with the pain.

Once you developed those two abilities—one, the ability to stay focused on a different part of the body and develop a sense of ease there; and two, the ability to allow that sense of ease to spread down through the pain—then you're ready to go right into the pain. Say, "What *is* this sensation of pain? Is it constant? Does it move? The perception, the label I place on the pain, is it accurate? When does the

pain seem to be a burden to the mind? When is it not?" It'll come and go. The pain may be relatively constant, but you find sometimes that the mind is upset by it and a few seconds later it's not. What happened? Where's the difference? If you can approach the pain with the desire to comprehend it, rather than the desire to make it go away, you learn a lot of important lessons about it.

You begin to see that the pain may be there in the body, but it doesn't have to have an impact on the mind. The way you label the pain is what creates a bridge into the mind, over which suffering comes. You can learn how to cut the bridge, so that even though the pain may still be there in the body, it's not affecting the mind.

As you learn how to use this approach with minor pains, you can start dealing with larger pains as well, particularly the pain that comes with disease, the pain that comes with aging. You've got the skills you need and you find that different pains require different insights. It's not the case that you learn one insight about the pain and it'll take care pain forever. But you learn the basic approach, which is how to put yourself in a position where you can analyze the pain, and make your quest not the quest to make the pain go away but the quest to comprehend it, which is what the Buddha said is the task appropriate for the noble truth of pain. You want to comprehend pain so that ultimately it's totally comprehended from all around. Then it poses no dangers, poses no surprises, poses no threat to the mind.

In this way, as you're learning to deal with the obstacles to concentration, you're also learning how to deal with other obstacles that are going to come as you approach death. This is why many of the Thai ajaans all say that meditation is a way of learning how to prepare to die, so that you can do it without suffering. That's a really important skill. So as you're sitting here struggling with pain and distraction, realize that it's not just a little thing you're doing here. You're learning an important skill. You're working on skills that are going to stand you in good stead for a long time to come.

Each time you've learned how to pull yourself out of a distraction or how not to get overcome by pain, you're working on that skill. So value these abilities, value these choices, because they really do make a difference. It's not that you're imposing an impossible task on the mind or that you'd be better off to go away and forget about it. When you find you're having trouble getting the mind concentrated, don't think, "Maybe this isn't for me. Maybe I should try something else." You're avoiding the skills that you really need to learn how to live properly, because if you can't get past pain, pain will start driving you in all directions, even before you die. Pain, fear of pain, loss and fear of loss: These are

the things that drive people into doing really unskillful things, even evil things in life.

So it's important that you learn the skills to overcome that potential, your own potential to disappoint yourself, your own potential to suddenly find yourself doing something really harmful, even though you'd rather not do that. When fear and pain push you, when distraction pushes you, if you can't trust yourself to do the right thing, you need to do a lot of work on the meditation. If you find yourself really a victim of these things, that's a sign that this is a strength you've got to develop so that you can learn how to trust yourself, so that you can handle any situation as it comes.

That way, that fear of death and death itself won't overcome you. You can stand solid in the face of them. That's a skill that everybody should learn how to master, and whether it's easy or not is not the issue. The important issue is that you apply yourself now to mastering that skill, and that you value every step of progress you make in that direction.