

## *Death Is All Around*

*December 26, 2005*

The sutta we chanted just now, the Not-self Characteristic, is often chanted at funerals because the fact of death is one of the things that takes the teaching on not-self and really pushes it right in your face: Someday you're going to die. This body that's been your all along won't be yours anymore. People around you are going to die. The people we love, the people we claim as "my father," "my mother," "my sister," "my brother," "my friend": All of a sudden, this or that person is just a body. A dead body. Something you no longer want to lay claim to. You have to get rid of it as fast as possible. If you wait until the time of death before you think about these things, it's a huge shock.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has you contemplate these things before death. Actually, the body has been showing that it's not you or it's not yours all along. When you cut your hair, when you cut your nails, before you cut them, that's your hair, they're your nails. But when you cut them, they just become dirt on the ground, something you want to sweep away. This shows you how arbitrary the idea of "me" or "mine" is. It's good to reflect again and again and again: These things that you claim as yours, exactly how long are they going to lie in your power?

And even before they leave you, they show that they're not totally under your power. When the body gets sick, it doesn't ask your permission. It doesn't schedule its illnesses so that they conveniently fit into your schedule. As for old age, it creeps up on you. We look at old people and forget that, as far as they're concerned, someplace inside them, there's the lingering belief they're still young people, that the aging has nothing to do with them. Of course, the body doesn't ask permission to grow old. It just does it. So you've got something that's not totally under your control. And someday it's going to totally leave you. So what are you going to do with it?

That's the important question. How much use are we going to get out of this body? How much good are we going to get out of this body before we have to give it up? If you simply hold on to the body as yours, or hold on to the sensual pleasures you get from the body as the main thing you gain from this body, then you're really setting yourself up for trouble. You get more and more attached to these things, and then when death comes, it's going to deprive you of them. Just thinking about death is enough to scare you. The pleasures you had, the body you hold on to: It's not going to be yours anymore.

That's trying to get the wrong things out of the body. But if you put the body to good use—observing the precepts, being generous, sitting here meditating, doing walking meditation: That's good use of the body, because the mind benefits. Ultimately, you can put the mind in a position where it doesn't need these things anymore, so it doesn't need to hold on. That's when it's really well-off. If the body goes, it won't have an impact on the mind.

So think of the body as something you've borrowed for a while. It may not lie totally under your power, but the extent to which it *does* lie under your power, try to get the most out of it in terms of developing good qualities of mind. The Buddha said that your true treasures are not things outside. They're not the body. They're not material things. Your true treasures are things like conviction in the principle of your actions, a sense of shame at the idea of doing anything that's not noble, concern for the harm that can come from unskillful actions, virtue, learning, discernment, generosity: These things are your treasures. People can take your body away from you, they can kill you, but they can't take these other treasures away from you.

So what you're doing is storing up as much of your real valuables as you can, so that when the time comes when you have to be separated from other things, there's no problem. You've got something really good inside that nobody can take away, that nobody can touch, that no event in the coming or going of the body, the aging of the body, illness, death, will have an impact on.

The same teaching applies to all the other aggregates: feeling, perception, thought constructs, and consciousness. You turn these things into a path. Focus on the breath, develop feelings of ease, spread them throughout the body. You use your perception of the breath to focus your concentration. You use your directed thought and evaluation, which are thought constructs, to keep your mind on the breath and to evaluate the breath. Then you're aware of all these things. That's taking these five aggregates and turning them into your path. They may not be yours, they may not be you, but you can use them as tools. Then, when the tools they've done their job, you can put them aside.

So when the Buddha says the body's not yours—it's not your self, it doesn't belong to you—that doesn't mean that you should just throw it away. When the other aggregates are not yours or your self, you don't throw them away. You very carefully look after them in the proper way. Use them. Look after them as you would look after valuable tools, but only to that extent, realizing that, as with any tool, there are times when you have to put them down, there are times when you have to abandon them. If you've used those tools to discover treasures that are really valuable, then there's no problem. If you haven't, then there *is* a real

problem. You're up the creek without a paddle. You have nothing at all to show for this human life.

So when you value these aggregates, learn how to value them in the right way. They are useful tools. They can be used to achieve the deathless. After all, with the deathless being unconditioned and unfabricated, you can't use the deathless to find the deathless. You've got to use these fabricated aggregates, these makeshift things. But that's the beauty of the Buddha's path: taking these makeshift things and using them to find something that's not makeshift, something totally and unlimitedly free. Once you find that, then it's really easy to let go of all these things, because you've got something a lot better.

And when you think of the various other things you could live for in this life, there's really nothing else that compares.