

Prepare to Die

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One of the saddest things in our society is the way we treat aging, illness, and death. Or more specifically: the way we treat people who are old, people who are sick, people who are dying. We tend to hide them away. And we don't really prepare them, which means we don't prepare ourselves for how to handle these things. You'd think this would be the number-one issue in any kind of education. When we learn geography, it's not really certain that we're going to have much use for geography. Or the various required courses: We don't really know how much different people will actually need the knowledge offered in those courses. But we do know that everyone is going to face the problems of aging, illness, and death, along with separation from the people they love.

This is why the Buddha has us reflect on these things every day. "I'm subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to being separated from all that is dear and appealing to me." And not only me, everybody no matter where, lay or ordained, man, woman or child: We're all subject to these things.

So how do we prepare? Part of the preparation is in that fifth contemplation: "I'm the owner of my actions, heir to my actions." We really can make a difference, through the way we act, as to how we're going to experience aging, illness, and death. What skills can we bring those processes as they occur?

Probably one of the reasons we don't like to think about these topics is that most people don't think they can prepare. They think that if you're going to die, you're going to die. It's beyond your control. If you're sick, well, you can get medicine, and if the medicine works, you're fine. But what if the medicine doesn't work? They don't prepare.

But from the Buddha's point of view, there's a lot you can do to prepare. You can get your mind into really good shape. You can develop qualities of mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment: These things really will hold you in good stead. A lot of the techniques we're practicing as we meditate will come in useful as we get sick, and especially useful at death. Even this technique of focusing the mind on one thing and learning how to let go of everything else: That's going to be a really skill as the time of death approaches.

But you can't depend just on skills like that. You have to look at the way you live your life leading up to those events, because the way you live has a lot to do with the way you're going to die, a lot to do with the way you're going to age, a lot to do with the way you approach illness.

There's one sutta where the Buddha talks about four reasons why people fear death, and they're all things you can do something about. There are also other possible fears mentioned here and there in the texts. One is just being worried about other people. There's a sutta where a man is really sick and his wife comes to him and says, "You know, the Buddha says the worst thing you can do when you're dying is to be worried. So don't worry about me, don't worry about the children. I can take care of myself. I have enough skills to support myself, and my practice in the Dharma is solid enough that I'm not going to waiver. You don't have to worry about me."

So when you know somebody who's dying or someone who's ill, that's one thing you should do to reassure them. There's nothing that they have to worry about in this world, so they can really focus their attention on what they're doing, how they're going to go through the process of death and coming out to rebirth on the other side.

The four fears the Buddha mentioned in that one sutta have to do with two kinds of attachments and two kinds of uncertainty. The attachments are attachment to the body and attachment to sensual pleasures. This is why renunciation is such an important part of the practice. If you're attached to your body, attached to sensual pleasures, you can't think of any well-being that can come without those things. The prospect of death is really scary, because you know that at death you have to leave this body. And our culture is such that we really foster attachment to the body. There are a lot of companies that make a lot of money because we're attached to our bodies, and they encourage this.

But if you don't want to be afraid of death, the first thing you've got to look at is this attachment to your body. Why are you attached to this lump of all these things in here? Probably it's because it's all you know as a source for happiness. So one way around that is to find other sources of happiness, like learning to be concentrated, learning to develop the ease and well-being that come when the mind is centered.

I once heard someone say that you shouldn't focus on the breath as your meditation topic, because after all, at death you're going to leave the breath and then where will you be? Well, we focus on the breath not to get the breath. It's because the breath leads us into the mind. It's the closest physical process there is to the mind. As you focus more and more on the breath, and the breath gets more and more still, a state of awareness just in and of itself becomes more and more clear. When that's solid enough, then you can switch your focus there. You realize that there's a sense of intense well-being that can come when the mind is really

focused, settled in. Then you can look at the body and see: What is there in the body that's really worth getting attached to?

This is why we have the contemplation of the 32 parts. Just go down the list: Which one of those parts would you really like to claim as you or yours if you were to take it out and put it on the floor? And look at what happens in ordinary everyday life. You clip off your nails and you don't want to keep the nail clippings. Hair falls out, and you want to sweep it away. Ajaan Fuang used to complain about me when I cleaned his hut. He said, "You leave hairs all over the place." So I had to go back and clean it again. Of course that didn't help, because I left more hairs. But it was a good contemplation. I told him one time, "I can't help it. I was born this way." He said, "No, there was some previous lifetime when you *wanted* to be hairy, now you've got it." These are the drawbacks that come with getting even the body you think you want.

If any part of the body falls off, as when a tooth falls out, you have to get rid of it. Skin scruffs off and you have to get rid of that. All of the things that come out of the body, you've got to get rid of them really fast. So what is that you really want to hold on to? What is there that's so magical and wonderful about it?

This contemplation is not to make you feel bad about your body image. It's for making you realize there's really nothing here or in any human body that's worth getting all worked up about. Nobody in the world has a body that's any different from yours in this regard.

So it's good to contemplate this, to see exactly where the attachment is here, why it's there, and what you can do to gain a sense that you could really be okay without the body. After all, there are states of concentration that don't have to depend on the body at all. They're states of awareness—but that's number four on the list. Let's save that for a minute.

Number two on the list is attachment to sensual pleasures. As I said earlier, this is why we practice renunciation, to get the mind used to not having any sensual pleasures to pick up on at any old time. It's so easy nowadays. You get bored, you can find a movie, get a video, listen to music, and the entertainment world is all over the place. There's good food. You look into magazines not only for general housewares but there's also the Dhamma Crap catalog, with all these wonderful things you can buy to enhance your meditation experience. It's all things, things, things.

So it's good to have a practice that cuts those things off. Ajaan Suwat once commented that when you practice the eight precepts—say, on the full-moon days, the new-moon days, or half-moon days, on the weekends, whenever's convenient—you're really learning how to practice restraining the senses. You

don't eat in the afternoon, that cuts off the mouth. You don't watch shows, that cuts off the eyes. You don't listen to music, that cuts off the ears. You don't wear cosmetics and perfumes, that off the nose. You don't lie on comfortable beds, that cuts off the body. In other words, you place restraints on these things, the types of pleasure you're going to typically look for, which forces you to look into the skills in the mind that enable you to have a sense of ease and well-being without these things.

A lot of people look at all the rules that the monks live by and say, "Oh my gosh, all these restrictions. Don't you go crazy?" I say, "Well, no. You find that you actually have other resources inside for developing skillful ways of finding pleasure." This is important. Restraint is an essential part of the practice. It's like putting up a dam across the river. You don't know how strong the river is until you put a dam across it. And what are you going to do with all that water? Well, you find other uses for it. You can irrigate crops. You can find ways of using those dammed up energies so that they don't just keep flowing away, flowing away, flowing away to no purpose at all.

So it's an important practice that you not be so attached to sensual pleasures, that you've got alternative ways of finding happiness inside. It's a useful skill to have now and it's especially useful when you face the prospect of having to abandon your sensual pleasures totally.

So those are the two kinds of attachments that make us fear death. This is how the Buddha helps us pry ourselves loose from those attachments.

As for the forms of doubt and uncertainty, one is the sense of insecurity that comes when you know you've done some wrong things and there's the possibility after death that you're going to be punished for them. It's not necessarily the case that there's somebody up there keeping records and they're going to catch you and say, "Hey, look, you did this wrong, you did that wrong, and we've got these laws and we're going to carry you off and punish you." It's simply a fact of action: You do something unskillful and it's going to come back in an unpleasant way. For a lot of us, we don't know this for sure, but there's always the possibility. You can start thinking about things that you did in the past, where you harmed other people, and there's always that uncertainty.

I've noticed that when people hear the teaching on karma for the first time, that's the first thing they think about: "Oh my gosh, I've got all these horrible I did in the past. You mean I can't get away with them?" Immediately dislike of the teaching. The way we can get around that, of course, is to make sure that we don't harm others. If there are people we've harmed in the past, the Buddha says,

develop thoughts of goodwill for them. Keep them in mind, keep that attitude in mind, so that you won't want to harm other people.

Because that's the next step, of course: to develop thoughts of goodwill for everybody. You make up your mind that "Whatever harmful things I did in the past, I'm not going to do them again. I'm going to exercise restraint." This is a different kind of restraint, not so much restraint in how you look at things, how you listen to things, but restraint in what you do, what you say, what you think, so that you can look back on your life and say, "There's nobody I've really harmed. Or even when I did harm somebody, I've learned from it. I didn't just keep doing it thoughtlessly."

That thought helps to allay a lot of fears.

The other uncertainty of course is, Is there a deathless? Is there something that survives death? The Buddha said quite definitely that there is. We have an awareness that's not harmed by death, that doesn't stop functioning at death. The more you develop that sense of this awareness inside, the stronger the position you're going to be in. And particularly when you reach the level where you've reached something beyond time, beyond space, you realize that the process of death is something that happens in time and space, but there's also an awareness that's not in time and space. Death can't touch that.

When you've reached that point in your practice, then you have no doubts, as the Buddha said, about the true Dhamma. You've got your own inner evidence that the Buddha knew what he was talking about. When you train your mind in virtue, concentration, and discernment, those qualities can lead to release. They don't cause that dimension to exist. An image in one of the texts is that the path is like a road to a mountain. The road doesn't cause the mountain, the fact that we're following the road doesn't cause the mountain to exist, but the fact that we follow the road does let us get there.

In the same way, this path of practice we have doesn't cause the unconditioned, because, by definition, nothing could cause the unconditioned, but the path does lead us to there to the edge, to the point where, as the phrase says, we can touch it with the body, i.e., we touch it with our total awareness.

When you've seen that, when you've known that for yourself, that ends your fear of what will happen after death.

So on the one hand, we exercise restraint, cut off all the unskillful things we do in search of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations, all the unskillful things we tend to do when we're thoughtless of other people. We exercise restraint whenever we find ourselves attached to the body. We remind ourselves: What is really there? We like to think of ourselves as attractive, but as the Buddha

says, the more you're concerned about your attractiveness, the more you find yourself tied down. The more you find other things attractive, the more you're tied down to them.

So in the process of overcoming our fear of death, we also find we can liberate ourselves from all the restrictions we tend to place on the body and the mind, particularly the restrictions we place on the mind. So here's the paradox: The more you exercise restraint, the more unrestrictive the mind becomes. And that ultimately is what the teaching is all about: freedom, freedom, freedom. Freedom from defilement, freedom from the influence of the khandhas. The mind is free from every form of restriction, every form of limitation placed on it by space and time. Free from fear. Free from attachment.

This is why the Buddha said that when you contemplate death, it doesn't just lead to more depression, it doesn't make you morose. You contemplate death in the correct way and it leads to the deathless. In other words, you realize that there are certain things you've got to do, you've got to prepare for. And as you develop those skills of the mind, you really do touch a dimension there that doesn't die. This is why contemplation of death is not a depressing or discouraging thought. It's the basis for heedfulness, and heedfulness is the basis for skillfulness. Skillfulness is the basis for release.

So learn to think about death in this way and you find that you really benefit.