Contemplation of Death: Living More Awake

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 21:49

Peace and joy. I hope you've had a fruitful day. I do not say happy, I say fruitful.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

Last night wasn't my fault. I think I've cured myself of mistakes of a beginner's nature. This was the broadband—it fell down to just one megabyte upload, one megabyte download, and in fact it's pretty slow at the moment. I don't know why, because we pay for a five megabyte upload and a ten megabyte download. I can only presume it's because we're at peak time, aren't we? This is when people are watching Netflix and Facebook and all that. There was no hope there, is there?

Anyway, the thing is not to expect me to appear. This is important. But to be delighted, or at least pleased, that I do so. And that way we shall get through this lockdown.

So I'm actually going back now to what we were discussing just a couple of days ago. Some people will have joined who weren't here for that, so I'll just paraphrase what was said because somebody sent me a question concerning this little letter that was written. It was just a letter from a man called Darrell Davis who was basically saying that we were spending billions of pounds and ruining the economy just to save a half of one percent of the population, a mere 250,000 people. And his last line is: it will take years to recover from this ridiculous path, which is ruining the economy.

Now, the question is that the reason for lockdown is to stop it spreading. But what the questioner, Julie, wants to know is: should we do this just for the sake of the economy? Is that why we're doing it? Whereas this man is saying the way we're doing it is actually going to ruin the economy. The question here—other illnesses that they could survive—and she obviously asks me what my opinion is. I'm not so sure about my opinion as such, but I think from the Buddha's point of view, as far as I can tell, remember the importance of right livelihood.

So the economy does—if you say to somebody about the economy, I think most people think, well, I can get rich or something. But the economy, a Buddhist economy as far as I'm concerned, is concerned with giving people right livelihood, because it's in this way that they create good habits, good *kamma*. And, of course, they can share in the wealth of society. And that's one of the problems, isn't it, with this neo-capitalism business. So that would be the importance of the economy, I think, in a Buddhist setting: the ability to have right livelihood. But, of course, we have a right to protect ourselves against illness and

enemies, I would say.

So there is another question here, which is rather delightful. I keep getting a question coming in my head, so I thought I'd ask it: Is it useful or constructive to nurture *mettā* towards the virus? Should we try to love the little beast? What do you think?

Well, I don't think I can personally raise to the level of any sense of love for the beast. I'm not so sure it would be considered a being. It's a very strange area. It seems to have agency. I mean, as soon as it enters your body, it knows where to go. I mean, it dives into your lungs and messes you about. And other similar rhinoviruses, the ones that cause cold and that. I had one a few weeks ago and it went up my nose into my head. So there seems to be some intelligence there, should we say. Whether it has consciousness or not is another matter. Whether it has any sense of awareness is another matter. I don't know.

But if we were to say that it did have consciousness and all that, then of course we have a right to protect ourselves. And that's what we're doing. That would be the attitude: that we are protecting ourselves from something which can harm our bodies. So it's not a case of developing aversion to the virus, but in a sense, recognising that they're just part of nature. I read somewhere you can have 500 million viruses on a pinhead. I mean, that's very, very small. And they're just part of the environment. They're just part of the ecological system. You can't get rid of viruses, it seems. But our attitude, of course, I think should be that we want to protect ourselves.

Interestingly enough, monks are allowed to protect themselves. So be careful you don't attack me. In China, where emperors blew hot and cold—sometimes they were all for Buddhism and supported it fully, and other times of course they persecuted it—it was from there that the monks developed this kung fu to defend themselves against attack. In those days, of course, it worked very well against bows and arrows and clubs. These days, I don't think it's so reliable to overcome our modern weaponry.

So that answers that. Do send me questions. Better to do it by email. Partly it gives me a chance to look at them, but also if I start communicating here, it gets a bit difficult. That's all.

So we're very fortunate tonight. We have about seventy-odd people with us. That's rather nice. I was reminded that some people will be with their partners and spouses and elderly children, so there's probably more there than meets the eye.

So what I wanted to do actually was follow up something that we were doing two days ago, which was my favourite topic: death. And I want to read—because we were talking about contemplating death, how to contemplate death, how the Buddha teaches it—and what I'm going to do is read a scripture which has been translated, I think it's been translated by Bhikkhu Anālayo. Now, if you haven't come across Bhikkhu Anālayo, he's quite a scholar and his books are based directly upon the scriptures, and of course he makes commentary on them. And he's also a meditation teacher and, for the most part, I think, very, very practical.

So the book that I'm taking it from is *Mindfully Facing Disease and Death: Compassionate Advice from Early Buddhist Texts*. Now you might not know this, but there are two collections: one that the Theravāda line holds, which is the one that we would normally refer to, and they're normally called *suttas* or discourses. But there was a whole load that were preserved in the Chinese of a line of a school of Buddhism called the Sarvāstivādins, and they're known as the Āgamas. And they've now been translated and studied, and they are very—you might say they are compatible with, definitely, and a companion to.

So the Buddha, in the numerical discourses that we have, has two discourses on death, how to do contemplation on death. The one is very similar to what we're going to do. The other one really brings out some other factor, which hopefully I'll get to.

So the contemplation of death is very powerful, and I also like to mention a couple of books really. There's one called *Living in the Light of Death: On the Art of Being Truly Alive* by a man called Rosenberg. Now I've read that one and it really is an excellent book. There are others, but this is the one I've read. And there's also Stephen Levine, who died a little while back now—he used to write lovely books, and one of them is *A Year to Live*. So the question is: if you really had only one year to live, how would you spend that time? So it makes you very reflective of how you're actually spending your time, as any meditation on death does. It brings you back into this present moment, makes it very alive.

So that's two books there by Anālayo: *Mindfully Facing*—if you've got a pen or something—*Mindfully Facing Disease and Death*. Anālayo: A-N-Ā-L-A-Y-O, Anālayo. And Larry—that's his name, Larry Rosenberg—which is *Living in the Light of Death*. And Steven Levine, of course: *A Year to Live*. I don't think you can get that as an ebook. I'm not sure, but the other two, I think you can.

So, this is reflections on death. Let me just turn this down a bit. So I'll read this just as it comes. It's not very long, so hang on in there. Remember, the Buddhist scriptures were all handed down in the verbal tradition of remembering the discourses one after the other. So they can tend to be a bit repetitious, but when you read them with the purpose of absorbing, the repetition actually does come through.

"Thus have I heard: At one time the Buddha was staying at Sāvatthī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's Park." So that was one of his main monasteries. "At that time, the Blessed One said to the monastics: 'You should cultivate the perception of death and give attention to the perception of death.'"

Although the word is "perception" here, I think we probably will get closer to the idea of contemplating death, or how you perceive death maybe, how you relate to death.

"Then one monastic among those seated there said to the Blessed One: 'I constantly cultivate giving attention to the perception of death.' And the Blessed One said: 'How do you give attention to the cultivating of the perception of death?' The monastic said to the Buddha: 'At the time of giving attention to the perception of death, I have the aspiration to remain alive for seven days and give attention to the seven awakening factors in the Tathāgata's teachings'"—that's the Buddha; Tathāgata, that's what he

called himself, the transcendent one, that's what it means—"'in the Tathāgata's teaching, that would be of much benefit, and I will not regret passing away after that. Blessed One, it is like this that I give attention to the perception of death.'"

So his aspiration is to stay alive for seven days and to contemplate the seven factors of awakening.

"And the Blessed One says: 'Stop, stop, monastic. This is not truly an undertaking of the practice of the perception of death. This is called being of a negligent nature.'" That's not very nice, is it?

"Now, again, one monastic said to the Blessed One: 'I am capable of cultivating the perception of death.' And the Blessed One said: 'How do you cultivate attending to the perception of death?' And the monastic said to the Buddha: 'Now I have this reflection. I have the aspiration to remain alive for six days, and having given attention to the right teachings of the Tathāgata, that might reach the end, then might reach the end of my life. This will thus be my good fortune, and in this way I attend to the perception of death.'"

So he's hoping to die after six days, during which he will attend or will contemplate the teachings of the Buddha.

"And the Blessed One said: 'Stop, stop, monastic. You are also of a negligent nature. This is not attending to the perception of death.' Now, again, the monastic said to the Buddha: 'I aspire to remain for five days.' I aspire to remain alive for five days. And someone said—and then somebody else says: 'I aspire to remain alive for three days. I aspire to remain alive for two days.' And one of them said, finally: 'I aspire to remain alive for one day.' Now, at that time, the Blessed One said to the monastics: 'Stop, stop, monastic. This is also being of a negligent nature. This is not truly attending to the perception of death.'"

"Now, at that time, there was again one monastic who said to the Blessed One: 'I am able to cultivate the perception of death effectively.' And the monastic said to the Buddha: 'When the time has come, I put on my robes, take the alms bowl and enter Sāvatthī to beg for alms. Having begged for alms, I turn back to leave Sāvatthī and return to my place. I enter my meditation hut and give attention to the seven factors of awakening. Then I might reach the end of life. It is thus that I attend to the perception of death.'"

So he's got no idea about one day, two days and so forth. He's just going to contemplate the seven factors of enlightenment and then he's happy to go.

"And the Buddha says to him: 'Stop, stop, monastic. This is also not giving attention to the cultivation of the perception of death. Monastics, you all spoke of negligent ways of practicing. This is not the nature of cultivating the perception of death.' Now, at that time, the Blessed One spoke to the monastics: 'Those who are able to be like the monastic Vikārin, that they are indeed reckoned to have the attention to the perception of death. That monastic is well able to give attention to the perception of death, being disenchanted with this foul and unclean body.'"

Now, the Buddha doesn't look upon the body as something that we should indulge. It's not something that

we should delight in. We shouldn't be concerned about how beautiful it is, etc., etc. And to get to that level is to recognise that beneath the skin, there aren't very many pleasant things. So he's always directing us to really be very practical about the body.

"'So if a monastic gives attention to the perception of death, collecting his mindfulness in front'"—which means being mindful here and now—"'with a mind that is unshaken, being mindful of the exhalation and the inhalation, for the time it takes for them to go out and return, and during that period he gives attention to the seven factors of awakening, that would indeed be of much benefit in the Tathāgata's teachings.'"

So it's like one breath. I don't quite know how you can attend to the seven factors. I suppose you're just being aware that you are aware of the breath. So in other words, you're being within the moment. I think that's what this is saying.

"'This is because all formations are entirely empty. They all become appeased. They rise and cease. They are all a magical illusion that is without any true essence.'"

So again, it's this business of not-self. It's seeing that, in fact, there is the breath, but there's nobody actually breathing. It's just the organism. It's the organism that is breathing in and breathing out. And you can get that sense when you've discovered within yourself that observation post where you're distancing from it and you see it as an object. So remember, the perceiver can't be the perceived. The one who sees an object can't be the object. The object is an object, not the subject.

"'Therefore, monastics, you should give attention to the perception of death in the interval between the out-breath and the in-breath, so that you will be liberated from birth, old age, disease, death, grief, worry, pain and vexation. And in this way, monastics, you should train yourself.' Now, as I understand this and as I've practiced it myself: as you breathe in and then breathe out, there's a break, isn't there? So that's the end of that process, the end of that breath. And it's bringing that sense of ending more and more into our lives that actually brings you into the present moment."

"At that time, the monastics, hearing what the Buddha had said, were delighted and received it respectively."

Very good. So that's the—I hope that gives you some indication on how to practice perception of death. The thing is to do it regularly for very small periods of time. After every sitting or the beginning of a sitting, just to bring to mind that we're living on a tightrope, we're living on a knife edge and you can fall off anytime.

I'm sure those of you who've been here know that I go on about after a meal: this is one less meal in my life. This is one less breakfast. This is one less porridge in my life. I mean, it's a horror story, really, a continual horror story. But it's bringing into our awareness that we are actually moment to moment ending. We're very aware of the beginning of things. That's not a problem. We're always there at the start

of something. But it's actually catching the end.

So breathing in, breathing out, and then recognising: at this moment, death could come to me, or there could be death.

So time moves on. If there's any questions, do send me questions by email, please, by email. And I think that just about does it.

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