

## **Playing dead<sup>1</sup>**

As soon as we are born, we begin to die. “We” here are our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind. “Die” here means the past being replaced by the present, which is in turn replaced by the arriving future. Even now, as we read this, millions of cells in our body are dying and being replaced by new ones. We are ourselves a tiny universe, an evolving microcosm.

This physical process is happening all the time, without our even being aware of it. However, if we reflect in this way, we can better understand that we are impermanent, ever changing, becoming other. Change is so universal that without it, we will not grow: we will really be “dead” to the real world, like a caterpillar devoured by a ravenous bird before we can grow into a free-flying butterfly. But “dying” is part of a process of change, so that we grow and mature.

From day one, our eyes start to go. The forms that we see may still be there, such as someone we know, or a book we are reading, or a tree we are looking at. Our eyes see momentary changes in whatever we look at – it’s like a celluloid film being played. That’s how we make sense of things and give them meaning: the reality is that we see only change.

Our ears start to go, whether we hear sounds or not. As we mature, we understand the meaning of sounds, and the nature of language. We see the difference between truth and falsehood. Our ears make sense of sounds and silence through impermanence and change. This is the only way we can hear and give meaning to our experiences. Above all, we feel the peace of silence and learn to value it.

We detect smell through subtle changes in our nose. We learn to smell as we mature, and at the same time, to like some smells, and to dislike others. For, different smells can mean different things to different people. They can bring back memories, happy ones or sad ones, depending in how we look at things. Still, all these smells come and go.

Taste is so vitally important to us. We decide what food we like or do not like by tasting them. But how do we learn to like certain tastes, or dislike others? We grow up tasting different things. Yet, if we keep tasting the same food, even our favourite, we end up not liking even the best one. Here again, we need change. So, taste itself is change.

Touch is how our body gives meaning to the changes it feels. We love weather that is neither too warm nor too cold. If it is the same weather throughout, we are likely to feel bored and would complain. Indeed, the weather always changes, and we still complain anyway.

Touch is also feeling. We enjoy the feel of certain people or animals we call pets, especially those we love. We reject the feel of those we dislike, or fear the touch of those we do not know. Yet, we cannot be touching or holding those we love or desire all the time. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, it is said. Absence here also means change: feelings and situations change, and we think that touching and holding our loved ones gives us a sense of permanence, the eternal now. No matter what we feel or touch, or don’t feel or touch, change is taking place all the same.

The things that we see, hear, taste, and touch were there before we were born and will be there even after we have died. We never become free from death through looking at beautiful things, or listening to pleasant words and sounds, or smelling the sweetest fragrance, or tasting the most delicious or nutritious food, or feeling the touch we most love, or even thinking the greatest thoughts possible. We can only sense these things, and to sense is to

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<sup>1</sup> Ajahn Jayasaro, “Faith in the Quest,” in Wat Pa Nanachat, “Forest Path,” 1999:211-224 esp 214 & 222: [http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf\\_file/forest\\_path.pdf](http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/forest_path.pdf)

be in the grasp of what we sense. More often, they are just distractions, and we are only fine-tuning these distractions. We are caught up in our senses, and are never free of them.

No sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, or thought—no matter how pleasant – can free us from suffering. What we see can blind us. What we hear can deafen us. What we smell can numb us. What we taste can dull us. What we keep touching loses feeling. And we are often tricked or trumped by our thoughts.

We are only free from our senses, at least momentarily, when we no more rely on them. When we free ourselves from seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching – like switching off the five phones that we have – we begin to experience our mind more fully. We learn to become more calm. No more phones ringing.

When the mind becomes calm, notice how our attitudes and values change. We begin to understand that stuffing the mind full of thoughts and fantasies is really senseless. We see that dwelling in even subtle forms of greed or ill will is a real waste of time. We might even realize that seeking the world for sense-pleasures is demeaning and pointless.

We wonder why we have never ever thought about getting out of these traps before! The mind of peace is a mind of true joy. When we are peacefully joyful, we see things more truly and clearly. Such a calm and clear heart give us a very different kind of logic to that of the busy mind.

We begin to feel a sense of sadness for the time that we've lost, allowing the mind to hang out with craving, aversion and ignorance. All that time has been squandered, stolen from us, as it were. To the peaceful mind, joy makes good sense. This is the mind that frees us.

Here's a beautiful story of mindfulness and meditation.<sup>2</sup> There was once a beautiful bird, with golden feathers, honey-sweet voice, able to sing so very melodiously, and was the king's favourite. Being such a precious bird, she was locked up in a beautiful golden cage. She was well fed, well groomed, well loved by the king, but she was always locked up in the beautiful golden cage. The king jealously guarded his precious property so that she did not fly away and no one stole her from him.

The golden-feathered bird in the golden cage was also very intelligent. In fact, she could speak, albeit not too many words, but enough for a bird, which was remarkable and entertaining for her owner.

One day, a wise monk visited the palace for an alms offering. After the alms offering, the king proudly showed the bird to the monk. Seeing the bird's sadness and the king's conduct, the wise monk knew that the king was very attached to her.

For a moment, when the king was away momentarily, the bird quietly asked the monk how she could be free, as she longed for the open cool fruitful forest. The monk then whispered to her, "Play dead, wise bird! Play dead, wise bird! If you die, you'll be free!" The clever bird at once understood.

The next day, when the king came to see the golden caged, he saw the bird lying still on her back. Terribly shocked, the king opened the cage door to check on the bird. As soon as the cage door was wide open, the clever bird's wings went FLAP! FLAP! and she shot right out to freedom of the forest, never to be seen again!

This parable teaches us beautiful Dharma. The golden cage is those pleasures that we keep running after: we are trapped by them. The king or owner is our body which we think we

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<sup>2</sup> This parable is based on Ajhan Chah's story of the bird in a golden cage (1999:213) and a Bodhi-dharma legend of how he taught a bird to play dead and free itself from its cage (R B Epstein, *Buddhism A-Z*, Burlingame, CA: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2003:20).

own, but the reality is that we are slaves to it: we have to feed it in six ways: with pleasant sights, pleasant sounds, pleasant smells, pleasant tastes, pleasant touches, and pleasant thoughts.

The beautiful and clever bird is our mind that wants to be free of the cage of ignorance and craving, but does not know how. The wise and compassionate monk is our own heart that learns to still itself. When we sit peacefully in meditation, all our six senses are at peace. Our body is peaceful and our heart joyful. We have truly renounced the world because we have understood life. We are on the stream flowing towards awakening.

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