

Mindfulness of Death

June 18, 2021

Of the four guardian meditations, two are special. Contemplation of the foulness of the body and mindfulness of death, the Buddha said, can both lead to the deathless. He doesn't say that about recollection of the Buddha, doesn't say that about the development of goodwill, but if you follow the contemplation of the body and follow mindfulness of death in the proper way, they can take you beyond the body and beyond death.

How mindfulness of death does this can be seen by those five recollections that we chant so often. The last three are especially relevant here. First, you simply remind yourself of the fact of death. It could come at any time. You haven't gone beyond it. You can see other people dying, and it's so easy to forget: They die; well, we're going to die too. We're remarkably blind in that way. We're like the penguins in the story Charcot told of his sailors down in Antarctica. They were staying in a penguin colony, and the sailors found that if they could go in quietly, they could kill a penguin right in the middle of the colony, take it back and make penguin pâté, as long as they were quiet about it. The other penguins didn't notice. The men could walk through the colony, and the penguins felt no fear even though their numbers were going down one by one by one. That's the way it is with a lot of us. So the Buddha has you reflect: You haven't gone beyond death. It can come at any time.

There's a famous passage where he's talking to some monks and saying, "Cultivate mindfulness of death." Different monks say, "Well, I already do that." The Buddha asks them how often they do it. One monk says he does it once a day. Another monk says twice a day. Monks get down to shorter and shorter intervals, until finally one monk says, "In the amount of time that it takes to chew a morsel of food, I tell myself I could die, but I can do a lot in the meantime." Another monk says, "In the amount of time it takes to breathe in and breathe out, I tell myself I have enough time in this one breath to do a lot of good in the practice." The Buddha says, of the various monks, only those last two are really heedful. The rest are heedless. In other words, you have to be right on top of the present moment, realizing that you have no time to waste. There's work to be done here.

What kind of work to be done is something that comes not only with reflecting on the *fact* of death but also the Buddha's analysis of what happens at death.

That falls in with the next two reflections. You're going to be separated from all that is dear and appealing to you. Often our first reaction to the thought of death is, "If I'm going to die, I'm going to be missing this person, that person." If the reflection were to stop there, you'd be left without any real guidance. You'd simply start getting sentimental, very attached, very clingy. But then the Buddha goes on to have you reflect about kamma: that you're the owner of your actions, the other person is the owner of his or her actions, and how you die, and where you're going to go after you die, is going to depend a great deal on your actions both present and past. It's not going to depend on the other person at all.

This is where the Buddha gives specific guidance, saying at the moment of death the mind is going to be swept on by craving, in the same way that a fire can be swept on by the wind from one burning house to a house next door, to set that second house on fire. The problem with wind is that it's blind. Craving tends to be blind as well, so you want to make sure that your kamma is not blind.

At the moment of death, you're going to be offered choices. The house that happens to be next door is going to depend on what you've been doing throughout your life. If you've been doing good things, there will be good houses. Things not so good, they'll be houses you might not want to go to, but that's where the wind will blow you.

So as the Buddha said, there are four qualities you want to develop to help ensure that you'll at least have a good house to be blown to.

There's conviction—conviction in the Buddha's awakening.

Virtue—making sure that you follow the precepts.

Generosity—that you're generous with your wealth, with your time. As the Buddha said in another reference to a burning house, when a house is about to burn down, you don't leave valuables in the house. You get them out of the house—and the ones you get out are the ones that you're going to be able to save. In the same way, the things you've given away are saved. The things you hold on to are the ones that you'll have to leave.

Finally, there's discernment—seeing what's skillful in the mind, what's unskillful in the mind, and knowing how to talk yourself into doing what's skillful and out of doing what's unskillful, regardless of your likes or dislikes.

So when you reflect on the fact of your own death, remind yourself, "These are the qualities I've got to develop in myself." When you reflect on the fact that the people you love are going to die, your best gift to them before you part would be to encourage them to develop these qualities as well. In this way, you're a true good friend to them, because after all, these four qualities are those, the Buddha says, of a *kalyana-mitta*, an admirable friend.

We tend to think of a *kalyana-mitta* as being a friend in the Dhamma, but being a *kalyana-mitta* can also mean simply that you're a friend to other members of your family, those who are close to you. If you really love them, you remind yourself that they're agents, too. They're subject to their kamma. Then you want to do your best to make sure, to whatever extent you can influence them, that they're established in these qualities as well.

There are other qualities that the Buddha recommends developing in preparation for death. There's a list of the qualities of devas. It's basically those four qualities—conviction, virtue, generosity, discernment—plus learning. This, of course, refers to the Dhamma you've learned, and most particularly, I think, the Buddha's talking about the Dhamma you've memorized. This is why it's good to memorize passages in Pali, passages in Pali and English, so that you have some skillful thoughts sloshing around in the mind. After all, as death comes, the mind can latch on to all kinds of things, and if you've been impregnating your mind with good Dhamma, then that will have an opportunity to have an influence on you at times like that. That's some of the past kamma you'll be bringing with you.

Similarly with the beings that go to the level of the Brahmas: They develop the brahmaviharas. This is another good way of preparing for death.

At the same time, you want to develop the qualities that you'll need right at the moment of the death, the present kamma that you'll be engaged in at that time. There's a sutta where the Buddha comes to a sick ward and he tells the monks to approach death mindful and alert. These are the two main qualities you're going to need at that time, and of course they're the qualities you develop as you meditate. The Buddha then gives the standard definition for establishing mindfulness: keeping focused on the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. The same with feelings in and of themselves, mind states in and of themselves, dhammas in and of themselves.

As for alert, you're alert to the postures of the body, the movements of the body as they're happening, so you're focused on what you're doing, and you want to make sure that craving doesn't sweep in and distract you at that point.

This is where the other guardian meditations are helpful. When you're feeling abandoned, alone, facing the fact that you could be dying, you recollect the Buddha and all the noble ones who've been practicing. You're following in their footsteps. They were able to approach the moment of death as victors—and, in many cases, alone. One of the purposes of the recollection of the Buddha and Sangha is that if they can do it, you can, too.

When memories come up of people who have wronged you or people whom you've wronged, develop thoughts of goodwill. When you start getting attached to the body, it's good to recollect that the body is made out of what? It's made out of those thirty-two parts, plus other parts, none of which is really endowed with any special inherent goodness. The goodness of the body is what you did with it. Now that it's a tool that's no longer functioning, it's time to put the tool aside.

If you can maintain your focus, then the Buddha has you focus particularly on the issue of feelings in the body, because those are the things that'll stand out most at that point. If there's a feeling of pain, he has you reflect on the fact that this feeling of pain is dependent on what? It's dependent on the body. Is the body constant? No, it's inconstant. If the condition is inconstant, how can the pain be constant?

There's another passage that says it's like the shadow of a stump. The stump is inconstant. It's not going to last forever, so how can its shadow last forever? So look at pains as shadows. And as the Buddha said, when you reflect on this, from inconstant you go to stressful, from stressful you go to not-self. That's how you engage in the last four steps of breath meditation at that point: focused on inconstancy, focused on dispassion, cessation, and then letting go.

So whatever pains come up, approach them this way, not with the thought that "This is my pain" or "I am in pain," but simply seeing that the body is one thing, the pain is something else. The body as a cause is inconstant, so the pain's got to be inconstant, too. Look for its inconstancy. That helps to pull you out.

Then the Buddha has you go on and do the same thing with feelings of pleasure and feelings of equanimity. In other words, if you're able to get the mind into deep concentration at the point, you realize that these states, too, are dependent on the body. The pleasure of jhana, the equanimity of jhāna: They, too, are things that you have to let go. If you can do this, the Buddha says, then you can be free of any aversion-obsession with regard to pain, any passion-obsession with regard to pleasure, and any ignorance-obsession with regard to equanimity. You sense these things disjoined from them, realizing that as the body ends, they're going to end, too, and what remains is the deathless.

So that's how mindfulness of death prepares you to find the deathless. It depends on remembering that we're not simply aware of the fact that death is going to happen, but we also have a particular take on *how* it's going to happen, the Buddha's instructions on how to anticipate what's going to happen. The mind will be swept along by its cravings depending on its kamma, the kamma you do as you go through the day and the kamma you're going to do as you approach the moment of death. Your daily habits, your meditative skills—these are the things

that will determine whether you suffer or not. This way, you're prepared emotionally, but you're also prepared in terms of the skills you're going to have to bring to bear. When you approach mindfulness of death from this perspective, then you're going to get the most out of it.

So as the Buddha says, when you see the sun set, remind yourself that this could be your last sunset. You could go tonight. Are you ready to go? Look at what needs to be done, both in terms of preparing yourself and in terms of leaving a good gift behind for the people you'll have to leave. Remember those four qualities: conviction, virtue, generosity, discernment. To whatever extent you can develop them, to whatever extent you can help others develop them, that's your gift. But your true gift to yourself, though, comes in the form of the skills you develop as you meditate, learning how not to get distracted, how to stay mindful, alert, and in particular, alert not only to the postures of the body, but also to what you're doing in the mind, how you're relating to your feelings and to your sense of the body.

So the work that needs to be done is not far away. It's all right here, which is good because there will come a time when death will be right here and you'll have your skills right here, too. You'll be prepared.