

# *Mindfulness of Death*

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Mindfulness of death is an interesting meditation in that it very rarely functions on its own. It piggybacks on other topics. There's one passage where the Buddha says that if you really want to be heedful, you remind yourself each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, "May I live for this one more breath, I could accomplish a lot."

In other words, mindfulness of death focuses you on the breath and what you can do with the breath. If you simply think with each breath, "I could do a lot, I could do a lot," you don't get much done. You have to ask yourself, "Well, what needs to be done?"

Look at the breath as bodily fabrication; the way you talk to yourself as verbal fabrication; and the perceptions and feelings you focus on as mental fabrication. What needs to be worked on in those three things? What insight can you gain into the process of fabrication as you work with them? That's the work that needs to be done.

So mindfulness of death is a guardian meditation in the sense that it focuses our attention right here, right now, and it encourages us to do the work that needs to be done right here, right now.

It's interesting that, in modern Buddhism, the present moment is seen as an end in itself: We practice to get into the present moment, then to stay there. But from the Buddha's point of view, we get into the present moment because there's work to be done there that will have an impact on how we face death.

So instead of being a topic to avoid thinking about death, staying right here in the present moment is important because it allows us to master the skills we're going to need at the point when death comes. This is how it's a guardian meditation.

In fact, the other guardian meditations also benefit from mindfulness of death because, as the Buddha said, there are four things that we fear as we approach death, and the guardian meditations help us with those. We fear losing the sensual

pleasures we've had in this life. We fear losing the body. We're afraid that if we've done unskillful things in the past, there may be punishment waiting for us on the other side. And then finally, we just really don't know what's going to happen if we haven't seen the true Dhamma. If we haven't gained the Dhamma eye, there are going to be doubts about the true Dhamma, and those doubts can really cause fear: What's going to happen? Is there nothing at all after death? Is there rebirth? What kind of rebirth is it, and how is it going to happen? Those are legitimate fears, and the different guardian meditations help us with them.

The fear of missing out on sensuality and fear of losing the body: If you've had some experience dealing with the contemplation of the body, it helps to overcome some of those fears. You realize that what you've got here in the body is not all that much. There's a lot of pain and a lot of trouble that comes with a body. You think of each part of the body, and there's a series of diseases that goes along with each.

So if you can overcome your attachment to the body through that contemplation, it makes you a lot less afraid of leaving it when the time comes. Otherwise, you'll hover around after you die, like that spirit the woman saw in the envelopes behind Wat Makut.

Envelopes in Thailand are little structures that are just a bit larger than a coffin. You stick a coffin in and you seal it up with plaster. They use these in Thailand because often when somebody dies, the family's not ready to hold the funeral quite yet. Maybe somebody's away or they don't have the money yet. So they keep the body in what they call an envelope, wait until they're ready, and then they take it out to complete the funeral.

There was a whole field of these envelopes behind the building in Wat Makut where Ajaan Fuang taught meditation. One night, one of his students was sitting and meditating with him, and she had a vision where people were performing a ceremony in which a coffin was being placed in an envelope. There was a man standing right next to the envelope, wearing a suit. After the ceremony was over, everybody left except for him. He looked left and right, and then went *zoop!* into the envelope. It startled her.

So without saying anything to anyone, she left the meditation room, went

down to where the ceremony had just happened, and asked some of the people who were leaving, “The person who died, did he look like this?” and she described the man in the suit. They said, “Yup, that’s the man.”

So she went back to Ajaan Fuang and asked him, “What do I do now?” He said, “Well, try to get back into concentration and see if you can get that vision again,” and she did. He said, “Okay, now look inside the envelope.” She saw the spirit perched there, hovering right next to its body, not knowing where to go. Ajaan Fuang said, “Now dedicate the merit of your meditation to him.” So she did. She said it was like a light going out of her chest, like a headlamp. The spirit looked at her, there was this flash in his eyes, and he left.

Sometimes Ajaan Fuang would walk around Wat Makut in the evening. They had a lot of funerals there and they had little pavilions where the funerals would be held. He called them body shops. He came back one evening after walking around and said, “You know, the number of people who die and hang around their bodies is awfully large.”

It’s because people are so attached to their bodies that they can’t conceive of being any place else but around the body. Well, a corpse is not something you want to hang around, so it’s good to see there’s nothing here that’s really worth hanging on to. The more you contemplate the body, the more the contemplation can pry you away from your attachment to the body, and you’re not so afraid of leaving it.

As for fear of things that you’ve done in the past that you might be punished for, the Buddha said the best way to deal with that kind of fear is, one, to remember that just because you’ve done something bad in the past doesn’t mean you have to go to a bad place after you die. Have a change of heart, maintain right view: That can protect you.

A part of right view is recognizing, okay, that was a mistake that you made, and you can’t go back and change what you did, but you can resolve not to repeat that mistake. That’s more right view. Then develop goodwill for everybody: the person you wronged, yourself, and all people everywhere. As you maintain that attitude of goodwill, that, too, is a protection. It helps to overcome some of the fears of what you’ve done in the past.

As for the fear that comes from not having seen the true Dhamma, the only way you're going to totally overcome that fear, of course, is to have your first taste of the deathless stream entry. But in the meantime, you can develop strong conviction in the Buddha's awakening.

Think about what he learned about rebirth, because what he learned about rebirth in his course of awakening is an important lesson in how to prepare for death. After all, knowing that you're going to die and thinking about the fact it could come at any time, if you don't also think about what actually happens at death, you can come up with all kinds of wrong ways of reacting to that news. Either fear or you might decide, "Well, what the hell, life is short, enjoy it as much as you can," and you go out and do all kinds of unskillful things.

But as the Buddha pointed out, we're reborn in line with our karma, and we're reborn in line with our cravings at the moment of death. It's not just what you did in this particular life or in previous lives, it's also the state of your mind when you die.

He compares it to a fire leaving one house and going to another one. It's carried along by the wind. In the physics of that time, they believed that fire actually latched on to the wind, clung to the wind. And in this case, he says, you cling to your craving.

You might think, "That's pretty good, I can go where I want to go." But the nature of craving is that it's pretty blind, and if the mind is out of control—which easily happens if you're in pain or drugged with painkillers—all kinds of weird cravings can come up at the moment of death and blow you off course.

You can think about it—you're leaving this realm, you're leaving this body, you're being evicted, and there's a lot of pain that goes along with death. So a lot of times, people either go for sensual craving, as they see that that's the only way to avoid focusing on pain, or they're simply afraid that they'll go out of existence, so they latch onto any kind of existence that occurs to them. Or they may decide that life is so much suffering they'd rather be just snuffed out. Well, that takes you to another state of being as well.

Then all the hindrances can come in at that time: There can be doubt. There can be restlessness and anxiety. There can be drowsiness. Ill will can come up as

you remember people who have wronged you in the past, along with sensual desire—and they can take over.

You've seen this in your own mind as you meditate. You're sitting here, all the circumstances around you are fine, everything's quiet, your body's not doing anything outrageous in terms of creating pain or illness, the circumstances are ideal, and even then the hindrances can take over. So what's going to happen when the body is falling apart and your life is ending? If you can't control the mind and keep it away from the hindrances now, how are you going to keep it away then?

When you reflect on this, this gives you a good idea of how you should prepare: You've really got to work on overcoming the hindrances. You can use those guardian meditations to help overcome your fears. You can work on the breath because, as I said, the way the Buddha teaches the breath as a topic of meditation, he focuses on fabrication: bodily, verbal, mental. These are the things that are going to shape your cravings. These are the things that are going to shape your state of mind. So when you get really skilled at handling these things, seeing them clearly and noticing how you can develop skillful fabrications and how you can let go of unskillful ones, how you get really skilled to get beyond fabrication entirely, you can make a difference in where you go. But you're not going to get beyond fabrication unless you really understand how to do it well.

When you've mastered these things, that's when you're ready, that's when you're prepared, and you can have some confidence that you'll know what to do and that you'll do it well.

So mindfulness of death isn't just thinking, "Die, die, die, I'm going to die." Sometimes those thoughts are useful when you find yourself sitting here meditating and thinking about the pleasures you're missing right now. You can remind yourself, "Well, I could die at any moment. This is not a good time to be thinking about those things. And the fact that I'm going to die means: How much are those things really worth?" Then you reflect, "What do I have to do? I have to get ready."

After all, it's not just that, when you die, events take over. I mean, it happens for a lot of people. They just allow events to take over. But you can't trust events

to take you to a good place. You've got to strengthen your mind, strengthen your intentions, strengthen your understanding of what's happening in the mind, so that when you're face to face with difficult issues as you're leaving the body, you'll be prepared.

Ajaan Maha Boowa gave a series of talks one time to a woman who was dying of cancer. After she died, the talks were transcribed, published in a big volume, and it was called, *The Dhamma for Getting Prepared*.

When you think about it, that's what all the Buddha's teachings are all about: getting prepared. When he left home, it was because he was trying to look for something that didn't age, didn't grow ill, didn't die. And what he taught: He taught us how not to suffer from these things as we go through them, and how we can discover something that takes us beyond aging, illness, and death entirely.

This is where everything is focused. Which is why mindfulness of death gathers into it all kinds of meditation topics. You can trace every meditation topic, every skill about the things you need to abandon, to mindfulness of death. That's how they're all connected.

And that's why mindfulness of death is a good meditation topic for encouraging you to get really good at the other topics, because they'll play an important role when the time comes to go.