

Reflections on Death

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When someone we love passes away, it serves as a profound teaching for all of us. It's rare that we have such vivid opportunities to reflect on death and its presence in our lives. Our culture typically doesn't encourage us to contemplate death.

In Theravada Buddhism, reflecting on death is one of the four protective reflections. The other three are contemplation of the Buddha, the practice of loving-kindness (Metta), and contemplation of the body and its unsavory nature. Each of these reflections counteracts a specific unwholesome mental state. Reflecting on the Buddha combats doubt, cultivating faith. Contemplation of the body counteracts greed. Metta is the antidote to ill-will. And reflecting on the radical impermanence of death counteracts complacency, instilling a sense of urgency. However, we must allow this awareness to permeate us. I admit that I often don't fully embrace this practice myself. Like many, I make plans for the future, acknowledging on some level that I will die someday, but not deeply engaging with that reality.

Sometimes, events shake us out of this complacency, reminding us of the teachings on dependent origination: birth leads to rebirth, and so the cycle continues. We often get lost in the enchantment of life, but fortunately, many of us perceive life more deeply, understanding that it's more than just a pursuit of pleasure, possessions, or youth. This realization can be profound. For instance, it's common nowadays for people to undergo cosmetic surgery or Botox injections to avoid looking their age, which reflects a desire to avoid thinking about aging and death. But contemplating death isn't morbid. For the Buddha, seeing a corpse for the first time was a divine messenger that prompted him to change his life and pursue deeper spiritual practice.

Contemplating death as a specific practice, when done with Metta and awareness of our limits, can lead to a profound understanding of impermanence, allowing the mind to release its attachments. This is the essence of the practice: finding the freedom that comes from letting go of our expectations of how the world should be. This brings contentment, ease, and ultimately, liberation.

There's a story from the time of the Buddha that illustrates this. The Buddha once visited a place called Alavi and gave a teaching. Among those present was a young woman, a weaver's daughter. She took the Buddha's advice to heart and made it a daily practice to contemplate death. A year later, the Buddha returned, knowing through his omniscient vision that her mind had matured through this practice. He waited for her to arrive before speaking. When she did, he asked her a series of seemingly puzzling questions:

"Where have you come from?" to which she replied, "I don't know."

"Where are you going?" Again, she said, "I don't know."

"Do you know?" She answered, "I don't know."

"Don't you know?" And finally, she said, "Oh, I know."

The audience was perplexed, but the Buddha explained that she had understood his teachings deeply.

When asked where she came from, she interpreted it as a question about her previous lives.

When asked where she was going, she acknowledged the uncertainty of what comes after death.

When asked if she knew, she admitted that she did not know when death would come.

When asked if she didn't know, she recognized the inevitability of death.

Her answers reflected a deep understanding of impermanence, and as the Buddha spoke, she attained at least the first stage of enlightenment. This story highlights the importance of realizing that our lives are transient, and it's essential to contemplate how we are using our time.

The practice of remembering death is not about becoming morbid, but about waking up to the reality that our time is limited. This realization can be beneficial if approached with compassion and balance. It's important to be kind to ourselves, not to judge ourselves harshly for how we spend our time, but to gently guide our minds toward wisdom and letting go. Even in the smallest moments, we have the choice to incline our minds toward greed, aversion, and delusion, or toward their opposites: non-greed, non-aversion, and non-delusion, which are rooted in wisdom and compassion.

The beauty of this practice is that it extends beyond formal meditation into every aspect of our lives. Whether we're walking, having tea, or simply being mindful, we can remember that our time is passing and consider how we want to live.

However, we must also be mindful of our limits. Not everyone is comfortable with this contemplation, and it can be overwhelming. If it becomes too much, it's important to shift our focus to Metta, allowing ourselves to open to these truths gradually.

Years ago, I had the opportunity to visit Varanasi, a city rich with the presence of life and death. I spent time at the burning ghats, where families bring their loved ones to be cremated on the banks of the Ganges. The experience was both profound and challenging. The first day, it was interesting. The second day, a little harder. The third day, it was quite painful. By the fourth day, I found it almost unbearable and chose not to return. This taught me the importance of knowing our limits and not forcing ourselves to confront these realities too quickly.

Reflecting on death can also open us to the beauty of compassion. Knowing that we all face death can deepen our empathy for others. It reminds us to be kind to ourselves and others, understanding that we are all navigating the same impermanent existence. This awareness can inspire us to act with compassion, whether by becoming an organ donor or simply being kinder to ourselves and others.

In the end, contemplating of death brings us back to the Dhamma, the teachings that guide us to awakening and liberation. It's a refuge that protects us from the cycles of rebirth. Being alive means we will one day die - no one escapes this. Yet, this reflection is not meant to be somber but to inspire us to live with wisdom, compassion, and a deeper understanding of the preciousness of our lives.

Thank you for your kind attention.