

September 23, 2017
Dharma talk
Contemplating death

Listening to a dharma talk is a particular type of listening. We hear the sound, and the cadence, the words themselves, and our response to the words. You may find that one or two ideas might resonate, open doors of understanding for a slight moment, and all the rest is forgotten. This is normal and a useful way to listen. You are not missing anything. And you do know that we will take six months of Wednesday evenings to consider all the things you did not hear. So, just listen receptively, and you will hear what is useful to you. And make room for any reactivity—with confusion, arguments, fear, or revelation.

For Jews, this is the Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It is a day to be quiet and receptive. We consider our mortality.

It is the time of year to dress in our metaphoric, or literal, burial shroud, and take and take responsibility for all that we do as individuals and as a collective. We make amends for any intentional and unintentional transgressions. We practice letting go of petty hurts and resentments. We repay debts, and perhaps even return books we have borrowed.

Every tradition has a time for this accounting. Considering our death informs us how to live. We need to think about the fact that all us air breathers die. Remembering death can change the way we interact with others. It can inform the choices we make. We can work to live with less regret, and to cherish life, and love in a full Technicolor, vibrant sort of way. There is no time to kill. We awaken to choices we are making right now.

Buddhist tradition says we cannot begin to live well unless we become familiar with the reality that we all die. We die. The person sitting next to you will die.

Both birth and death are where reality meets mystery. But it is death that unleashes fear that can paralyze us. So, today we are considering death. Our own death, and the death of everyone who breathes. We fear the unknown, loss and suffering. It is of mystery.

We can make up stories about the transition from breathing to not breathing. We can devise schemas about what happens next, and try to soothe ourselves with stories. That is a temporary fix.

But the fact is, we don't know anything, except that we, and everyone we love, all our bodies will die.

Terror can arise when we earnestly consider this fact.

Our first defense may be to try to ignore it.

It is amazing that the passage of time and aging and death take us by surprise.

We ask, "how did I get this old?" What a silly question.

This is the ultimate in ignorance leading to delusion.

How can there be the cultivation of wisdom if we are in denial?

We need to prepare for becoming infirm.

We need to prepare for death.

We need to become familiar with the inevitable.

We need to take in the fact of death, as a practice.

This is not nihilism. This is so we can fully embrace the astonishing and improbable fact of being alive. It is to waken us up to the preciousness of life.

This breath, in this moment, is incredible!

Attending to the breath as if it were the most important thing.

The smell, or the heat, or the movement of the person sitting next to you is amazing. The feel of the air upon your skin. The quality of light in the room.

Remembering death helps us cultivate discriminating wisdom. It cuts through petty resentments with precision.

We practice remembering that death is the great equalizer.

Everyone dies: the rich, the poor, the powerful, the helpless, the famous, and the forgotten.

Remembering death helps us focus on what is truly important. Why save that for the last few months?

Remembering death helps us wake up! To live well!

Life and love become more intimate.

And the Buddhist death practices are clearly laid out. There is a path to follow when we do this work.

We are reminded that death is unpredictable in its timing, but it is a certainty that it will come.

So we can treat death as if it is always near and constant.

I am going to introduce two simple practices, which you can take on, or not.

The first comes from one of the foundational texts of the Theravadan tradition.

It is a meditation on the word “death”.

Knowing the name of something or someone is really important. That is how we develop a familiarity. I love learning the names of flowers and ferns and trees. I learn to see them and know them. They become friends.

In French, when you go from “vous” to “tu”, it speaks of a new intimacy.

In the fairy tale of Rumpelstiltskin, the fair maiden bravely went out into the woods alone at night, and found the home of the imp who threatened to take her child, and she learned his name. She broke his power over her life by learning to say his name out loud.

So, in this practice, we place the word “death” on our forehead, and keep it there. In the beginning, you may want to hear the word internally on the exhale and then the inhale. And then settling on the name during exhale. The mind can concentrate on the meaning of the word, and be careful it is not a rote repetition. (Philip Kaplaeu, The Wheel of Life and Death, pp.64-5; Visuddhimagga, the Path of Purification, translated by Bhikkhu Nanamoli, pp. 225-235)

Eventually you can take this practice out into the world, and see the name of death on everyone’s forehead. This can bring your awareness into clarity. It can cut through pettiness of transient moods. It can take any pre-occupation and turn it into folly. There is little that holds absolute importance, other than kindness and patience, in the face of death. It can also embolden us to take action when necessary. We become familiar with the fear of death when we bring it out into the open.

In our guided meditation, I usually state when we get to the forehead: “We are skin and muscle and bone, solid and liquid, space and heat”, and this, too, can be a reminder of our physicality, and the finite, mortal quality of our bodies.

Here is the reminder of death. We can get familiar with its name and what it means for all of us. This is a practice.

There is another practice I would like to introduce. This is something I have been doing for years. I had been thinking about what I would like to focus on as I die. What I would like to practice so it becomes a reflex? I decided I would like to bring to mind all those I love, one at a time, in turn. During air travel, during take off and landing, being the scardy-cat that I am, that became my natural time to cultivate this practice. Over the years I have tied the energy of fear to the capacity to love. This can transform the fear into love.

There are many ways to practice remembering death, and you might look for a practice that suits your temperament. It may be as simple as looking at the Milky Way in the night sky, and letting that view adjust your view of your place in the universe, in the frame of all time and space.

So as we sit here for the remainder of the afternoon, perhaps some of us might create an intention to remember our mortality, and the mortality of all those around us. I am curious to know how that changes your relationship with the present moment, this moment, this breath.

Please know that this practice unfolds over time. You don't have to work hard at it, but just be willing to practice. A familiarity develops first with the word "death". We can learn to say its name. Then we let the fullness of its meaning resonate gradually, as much as we mortals can hold and have available to us. It is a utilitarian practice. We don't do this just to scare ourselves, but to awaken ourselves to living wholesomely. We increasingly integrate the implicit fear, we learn to let it open our hearts, learn to trust, and lead us to our own integrity. We learn to live, creating less regret and guilt. The knowledge of death moves us toward what we value.

After that, we can begin to learn to live with absolutely uncertainty, that we know very little. We make friends with not knowing.

Rather than trying to stand on the quicksand of knowing, we rest on the firm ground of unknowing. With trust and equanimity. This can be our intention.

Thank you.