

Death as the Ultimate Spiritual Teacher

By Peter B. Williams

In this culture of lookin' good and feelin' good, thinking about death is about the last thing anyone would want to do. Such a topic is the ultimate buzz kill. Yet the Buddha frequently exhorted his students to think about their mortality. He believed so strongly in the benefits of facing this challenging topic, that to this day Buddhist monks and nuns do daily reflections on their mortality. This talk and set of meditation instructions is based on these reflections.

Suzuki Roshi, the revered Japanese Zen master who taught in the U. S. in the 60s and 70s, in typical Buddhist bluntness on the topic said, "Life is like stepping onto a boat that is about to sail out to sea and sink." While such a statement may sound morbid, Buddhists believe that thinking about one's death is an act of ultimate kindness, of ultimate care, because death is about the only thing in life one can count on. The mundane realities of our lives—raising kids, working busy jobs, trying to have fun to recover from it all—press intensely upon us and we must be responsible to these realities in every way we can. Yet, can we do so without entering a tunnel that blinds us to the most profound reality of them all—that we will die and we do not know when? Want to be a true realist? Contemplate your death. Of course such contemplation can be quite challenging, so it is important to do so out of a spirit of loving and caring for ourselves. Can we feel so tenderly towards ourselves and our loved ones that we are willing to frequently remind ourselves that our lives are as fragile and fleeting as leaves tumbling in the October wind?

Contemplating death is a deeply constructive practice. In addition to helping reconcile us to our own death, such contemplation also teaches us how to live, how to work wisely with impermanence, how to see that loving and letting go are the same thing, how to practice deep acceptance, and how to get our priorities straight. When we contemplate that "Someday I will die and all this will be over" we learn that life is ruled by impermanence. Not only does death happen at the end, but the currents of birthing and dying govern every aspect of our lives. We have already died to so much. Do you remember how you felt during your first real kiss? The intense excitement of the high school prom? Where are those milestones now? Do you remember wondering if you could ever get good at anything and then surprising yourself by finding that thing and eventually taking it for granted? I have played soccer since I was 12 and I always aspired to be a star and never was. I was usually just a pretty solid midfielder playing on teams with many players better than me. But once I was a star, scoring three of our team's four goals in a championship game, including the winning goal. When my shot arced into the upper corner to seal a 4-3 victory I went nuts. I had reached a mountain top that I thought I would never stand on. The view from that pinnacle of excellence was seriously intoxicating. The team went to a bar to celebrate and I got many congratulations. A teammate even told me "You are my hero!"

And that was it. I've barely talked about it since. That joy that you could say I had worked towards for 20 years lasted about two hours. That was 10 years ago and it has been all downhill from there. I have lost the competitive urge and only play pick up

soccer and am just fine with that. Can you think of similar situations in your life?

When we look back it is easy to see impermanence and the fleeting, dreamlike nature of things, says meditation teacher Joseph Goldstein. But it is in looking forward, he says, that we tend to solidify things and forget how slippery life actually is. Luckily, if we muse far enough into the future, we will find death waiting there to remind us, “Not so fast, buster. Sure, how you will do on stage in that amateur production of ‘The Color Purple’ is important to you, but is it worth devoting your every waking moment to it?”

Death, as the ultimate reminder of impermanence, helps us live our lives more richly. The worst that can possibly happen to us turns out to be the only guarantee, so in a way we have nothing to lose. We can most truly live in harmony with the truth of mortality by noticing all the impermanence already happening to us. Rather than a dreary exercise, seeing the impermanence of everything helps our minds be less sticky, less attached. When one starts seeing life as a constantly flowing exchange of energy rather than a series of events victimizing a solid “me,” the mind starts to let go. In fact, things become beautiful because of their very fleetingness. How beautiful would a sunset be if it was there all the time? The beauty of that “b” that your child writes clearly for the first time is enhanced by the fact that they will quickly move on to accomplishing others feats of childhood. Impermanence teaches us to love and let go at the same time. Since everything is flow, to truly love something we must love to watch it do its dance, from children to partners to the basil in our gardens. Death teaches us that we will have to let it all go at the end, so why not start now? We can start letting go now simply by waking up to reality as it is, seeing that all day long life is a rapid fire succession of events that arise, last a bit, and fall away.

Death also teaches us ultimate acceptance. Death will happen and we do not know when and this is out of our control. Do we live our lives informed by this truth? Might this simple formulation—in life, the worst that could happen is the only guarantee—help us be more accepting of all that we cannot control? These lines from Dylan Thomas’ “Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night” epitomize, for me, the opposite of what contemplating death has to offer:

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

The Welsh poet is speaking in the poem to his dying father. Yet he seems to be asking his father to fight against the inevitable, to rage against that which cannot be changed. The Buddha said to try and change what cannot be changed is suffering. Death, instead, teaches us to be at peace with what cannot be changed. If we can contemplate our death and really accept that this is our destiny, then life will take on a whole new meaning. We can start to see what really matters to us.

The Buddha called death a heavenly messenger. It is heaven reminding us that we are not going to heaven by being attached to this body and personality, which end with our last breath. It is heaven reminding us that we had better get our priorities straight, had better get to work on finding what does not die, what we can truly rely on.

The Buddhist answer to this question is exemplified in the fact that although the Buddha reached unshakeable peace, or nibbana, he was not immune from death. His unshakeable peace included knowledge of his mortality. The Buddha taught us that we can all reach this peace ourselves. It is very hard to talk about nibbana; it is indescribable. The Buddhist suttas almost always refer to what it is not – the deathless, unconditioned, the unborn, the unformed. However, nibbana can be experienced and ultimately the entire purpose of meditation is to bring us to this realization. Nibbana is experienced chiefly as the joy of non-separation, a kind of divine union resulting from the destruction of the illusion of a separate self. In addition, says the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, true enlightenment is a continual resting in effortless awareness.

The very good news is that meditation encapsulates all of the above lessons into the simple practice of being aware of this moment. When we notice thinking and return to the sensations of breathing, we are letting go of past and future and attending to impermanence, witnessing birth and death with every rise and fall of the chest. We are learning to dance with the flow of experience and learning to surrender to that which cannot be changed. When practice really matures, it naturally leads to the insights of divine union as well as to the fact that awareness really is happening all by itself, as long as we are not distracted.

Thoughts on the Contemplation of Death

Here is a simplification of the classical 5 daily contemplations done daily by Theravada monastics. The contemplation consists of four parts: 1) My death is certain. 2) The timing of my death is uncertain. 3) I must let go of everything I cherish when I die. 4) How might I live my life informed by these truths? I will unpack these a bit here and describe the actual meditation in the section below.

My death is certain. This might seem simplistic, in the “Well, duh,” realm of spiritual teachings. Yet, it is rare we stop and remember this thought. And in this culture, it may not be so obvious to everyone. I can’t remember if it was Jack Kornfield or Sharon Salzberg, but one of them on retreat told a story about a friend whose mother lay dying in a hospital bed, repeating over and over, “Why me? Why me?” In our sanitized world, where people die isolated in hospitals or nursing homes and animals are slaughtered in desolate prairie factories, denial is probably the main strategy for relating to death. Obsession with appearance and achievement are two of the main ways we deny the reality of death. We can be living life enslaved to developing our own skill and power, oblivious to where the game is all ultimately headed. In this we may be like pint-sized versions of the great Ozymandias, as depicted in Percy Shelley’s poem by the same name:

Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies, ...
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains: round the decay

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Ozymandias, scholars say, is likely Ramses the Great, one of the greatest pharaohs in Egypt. In the BC 1200s, when the average ruler reigned five to ten years, Ramses ruled for a whopping 65, presiding over a kingdom stretching from modern Egypt up the eastern Mediterranean coast and into most of modern Turkey. Death reduces even as powerful a man as this to a couple of stone legs standing in limitless sands.

The time of my death is uncertain. While remembering our own mortality is challenging, an even more sobering reflection is that death can happen at anytime. Are you planning your life as if you will reach the national average—75 years old if you are male and 81 if you are female? You may well reach this age, and yet, how do you know if you are destined to live an average life? I have a good friend from New England who until last summer had two daughters, an outgoing daughter aged 11 and a shy daughter in her junior year of high school. The elder daughter was a talented musician and performed nationally in youth groups. My friend traveled last summer to Israel with her younger daughter, leaving her older daughter in the care of her ex-husband. Partway through her trip, she got a call from her ex, who stumbled through the shocking and unthinkable words that their elder daughter was dead. She had a known heart condition, and though doctors had advised her normal exercise was fine, she had apparently had a heart attack on an exercise bike in the basement of her home. My friend has been reeling from the loss ever since and continues to profoundly grieve this loss on a daily basis. I am sure we all know tragic stories like this. How many people do you know who have died unexpectedly “before their time?” Amidst the grief or sadness you may feel about these losses, can you let their deaths teach you that death can happen to any of us at any time?

Because death can arrive so unexpectedly, we need to make sure we are already living as full and spiritually deep a life as we can. While John Lennon sang “Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans,” Chogyi Nyima Rinpoche, my Tibetan teacher, has another saying: “Death is what happens when making other plans.” Our plans are endless, he says. The only way to end them is to be willing to leave some unfinished enough to make room for spiritual practice. Along these lines, the Dalai Lama at a teaching told a story about a Tibetan teacher who tells a prized student that one day they should go on a picnic to a special place. The student occasionally reminds the teacher of his promise, asking him when will they go on their picnic. “Soon, soon, “ the busy master would always reply. Years pass and they never go on the picnic. One day as the two are walking in town, men walk by carrying a man’s corpse on a stretcher. The teacher, thinking he might educate the student about the realities of life, asks the student, “Where is that man going?” The student replies, “On a picnic.” The Dalai Lama and his translator stopped the entire teaching for several minutes, unable to contain their laughter at the punch line of the story. The Dalai Lama has a wonderful way of lightening up the heaviest topics!

When I die I will have to let go of all that is dear to me. In this reflection, we remind ourselves that when we die we will have to let go of all that is dear to us: Every family member, every friend, every accomplishment, every skill, every memory. Although this can be very challenging, especially if you are a parent, this reflection can help us live

our lives with greater ease and freedom. We are already saying goodbye all day long. Our children, our lives, our minds are constantly ending and beginning. And the end is guaranteed, so why not plan ahead now and say goodbye in your heart. Then every moment, every event, every day in their lives is a blessing, a gift. The trick is to not let this reflection be a disconnect, but an invitation to love deeper, to love things as they truly are, impermanent and wild and exciting. Pablo Neruda summarizes this all beautifully in *Still Another Day, Aun Poem XV*:

We, the mortals, touch the metals,
the wind, the ocean shores, the stones,
knowing they will go on, inert or burning,
as I was discovering, naming all these things:
it was my destiny to love and say goodbye

He is touching, loving all these things that will outlast him. He is still discovering them as he realizes he will also have to say goodbye to them. Learning to love without attachment is what our heart most deeply wants, and death is dying to teach us this lesson, if only we will listen. The late Ajahn Chah, Jack Kornfield's main teacher from Thailand, puts this teaching into a simple image. He holds up a cup and says that the way to relate to the cup is to treat it as if it is already broken. No, it isn't yet broken, but its nature is to break. If we know that is the cup's nature going in, then we can treat every day it gives us as a gift, a blessing of generosity from the universe.

Given that I could die at any time, am I living a life in that reconciles this truth? This question will make you look at your life and see whether you are living in tune with your deepest longings. What matters most to you? And a different but related question – Can you live your life in such a way that will help you when it comes time to die? As the old joke goes, it is a rare person who sits up in their deathbed and exclaims, "Gee, I wish I had spend more time at the office." Maybe your answer is to love better. Or to be more mindful. Or to do more service. The key is to explore this question open heartedly and find your own answer. Continued exploration of this question will eventually bring you deep faith and purpose in your life. Sharon Salzberg, in her book *Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience*, writes about her beloved Indian teacher finding her answer:

Devastated by the deaths of her husband and children, my teacher Dipa Ma remembered asking herself, "What can I take with me when I die? I looked around me: My dowry—my silk saris and gold jewelry—I knew I couldn't take them with me. My daughter, my only child—I couldn't take her. So what could I take?" At that moment she decided, "Let me go to the meditation center. Maybe I can find something there I can take with me when I die." What Dipa Ma found formed the core of what she could have faith in, something that couldn't be torn away from her through change. What can any of us place our faith in that endures? According to Buddhist teachings, to discover that is to know the deepest level of faith.

Contemplation of Death

Contemplation is a style of meditation in which thought is actually used instead

of let go of. However, one directs one thoughts down a particular path and stays on that track. One also tries to stay present to their experience, noticing their emotions and reactions as one proceeds. If one notices one is thinking off topic, one brings one's attention back to the conceptual task at hand. If one gets too lost in the wild stories, it is best to leave the contemplation and focus on the breath for a while until the mind calms down and then begin again. In addition, it is best to keep one's thoughts on the matter simple. Wild fantasies about how and when one might die can be noticed as "thinking" and one can return attention to the more simple truths of the topic, such as "This body and personality will die. It is a certainty."

I recommend a 20-30 minute period, starting and ending with 3-5 minutes of mindfulness of breathing. In the middle period, one allots equal time to the four reflections below. Treat the words below as a general outline of the contemplation and fill in the thoughts with those that are most relevant to you.

I am of the nature to die. This body, this personality, this mind will all come to an end. My death is certain.

The time of my death is uncertain. I could die anytime. At the age of 78, next year, next month, today.

When I die I will have to let go of all that is dear to me. Every family member, every friend, every accomplishment, every skill, every memory. I will have to let go of everything.

Given that I could die at any time, and will have to let go of all I cherish, am I living a life in harmony with these truths? What matters most to me? How can I live my life so that I can die well?

As I said above, monastics reflect on these truths every day. If this meditation moves you, I highly recommend you do the same,. You could either do it on a regular basis, or add it into the first five minutes of your regular practice. Best of luck!