Contemplation of Death (Again) - Living with Frugality

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 32:11

Greetings, I hope you've had a fruitful day. I do not say happy, I say fruitful.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble, and fully self-awakened one.

Some of you who get my email, get the news bite, might have got the news that they had a big meeting at five o'clock on Zoom to offer good wishes, prayers, and so forth for Rob Bia, whom I think most of you know. So I'm hoping to mention him tonight when we do the business of compassion. Just bear with me a second so that I remember to do that. Hopefully I will.

So I did say that I would be approaching the question about the Eightfold Noble Path, but I've been dragged back to contemplation of death. I hope you don't mind. It's always an absorbing topic for me.

So I just want to read an email that came concerning somebody who's been practicing this. He says, "This morning, I managed to catch up with the talk on death and the virus, which I found intriguing. I followed it up with a 20-minute contemplation on the last breath. It's powerful stuff, a quick way of generating a lot of unpleasant feelings. After 20 minutes, I decided to switch to metta, compassion practice for myself and others to balance the exercises. The feelings that came up in the death contemplation lingered through the morning and gave a certain edge to the day."

Get that? An edge to the day, living in the moment.

"Now, in the afternoon, I went on a cycle ride and ended up doing a second death contemplation in a quiet local graveyard, the one about decay of the dead body." Now, that refers to the *Satipaṭṭhāna* discourse especially, where in the body section on how to develop mindfulness of the body. The last section, of course, is the cemetery contemplations, where in those days the bodies were just being laid out in the charnel grounds, eaten by animals, and so forth. And they were shrouded in white shroud, and the monks would take the cloth. I think this was a general habit for the *śramaṇas*, for those who become recluses of various different teachers, to take that cloth and stitch it into robes, you see. And the Buddha in that discourse really is saying go and sit there and just watch that decomposition, and you're supposed to be saying as this body is, so mine will be. That's pretty heavy.

So anyway, here he's referring to that in a quiet local graveyard, the one about decay of the dead body. "And I found this one surprisingly easy. Maybe it was the ecologist's perspective. For me, there's

something comforting about the realization that I'm going to end up as food for something else. Waste not, want not. I left the graveyard with a great sense of calm."

Now that, of course, is the purpose of death meditation, or one of the purposes, to have come to an acceptance of it, a growing acceptance of it. Of course, we never know how much we've accepted the process of dying or the moment of death until we're actually doing it. But at least we can approach it, you see, and just take away its sting. Oh death, where is thy sting? So "I left the graveyard with a great sense of calm."

And then his last paragraph: "I will soon have more cause to observe and contemplate death and its effect on the living as a coffin bearer in a local gypsy funeral. Apparently it's becoming difficult to find four physically fit people who don't have to isolate themselves. There may be a whole new unexpected line of work opening up for me over the next few months." And may that be so.

So there we have an email from somebody who's been practicing it. I would love to know that you have been practicing it and what effect it's had on you. For me, as I said, it was an enormously powerful practice in my youth, actually, in my twenties. That's when it really hit me, this whole thing about death. Now, at that time, I was an annihilationist. I thought that when you die, that was the end of it. So my big question was a really silly question, really, was you know, what was it like to go into nothingness? I mean, it would be like nothing, wouldn't it? But for some reason, it became an obsessive investigation.

So definitely something to practice. You'd have to do it. I mean, he did it for 20 minutes. That's quite a lengthy length of time. And if you want to do it on a regular basis, it can be just that few breaths where you remind yourself, you know, life is on a knife edge. And as I said, occasionally during the day to just acknowledge that the cup of tea is finished. That's it. You know, that's it. It's gone. There is no more. There's another cup of tea, but that cup of tea is completely gone. And the effect of that, of course, is to bring you into the present moment. That's the purpose of it, to live in the now. Whereas, for the most part, we're planning to live in the now. That's ridiculous, isn't it?

And now I do want to follow up that too with the Anguttara Nikāya. See how big it is? You do some damage throwing this at somebody.

I mentioned last night that the discourse I read was from the collection which was only extant in the Chinese and has been translated and is used by Bhikkhu Anālayo. He seems to like those, probably to make us aware of them, really, and read them. But there are parallel discourses in the Theravāda tradition.

So one of them is very much like that, except there's this slightly different way of doing it, you might say. So again, he's been through all these bhikkhus who tell him that they just want enough time to eat half of their alms food so that I may attend to the Blessed One's teaching. "I could then accomplish much." So we could translate that these days, that you would only want to eat half of your alms meal or half of your

meal so that you could practice spiritually.

And then another one says, "May I live just the time it takes to chew and swallow four or five mouthfuls of food so that I may attend to the Blessed One's teaching. I could then accomplish much." So they're always doing something in order to, they're always doing this thing, contemplation of death in order to listen to the Buddha's teachings. And as I say, we can translate that these days is in order to continue our spiritual practice.

But at the end of the discourse, the Buddha delineates what in fact constitutes a proper contemplation of death using the similar image. The bhikkhu, remember, refers to anybody who's listening or reading the scriptures, right? It's a figure of speech. I can't remember what it's called now. It's like when you say all hands on deck. We don't expect just the hands to turn up.

But the bhikkhu who develops mindfulness of death thus, "May I live just the length of time it takes to chew and swallow a single mouthful of food so that I may attend to the Buddha's teachings, the Blessed One's teachings. I could then accomplish much. He is one who develops mindfulness of death." And there is one who develops the mindfulness of death thus: "May I live just the length of time it takes to breathe out after breathing in and to breathe in after breathing out so that I may attend to the blessed one's teachings."

And then he says, "These I call bhikkhus who dwell heedfully." We could also say diligently. I think the word being translated here, because I haven't been able to look up the Pāli, is *appamādo*, which is a very favourite word of the Buddha. It's one of his last, *appamādena sampādethāti*, you know, strive diligently for your liberation.

So that one is similar to the one that we read last night. But there's another one, which is a slightly different take on mindfulness of death, you see. So he again tells the bhikkhus, "Mindfulness of death, when developed and cultivated, is of great benefit, of great fruit, culminating in the deathless, having the deathless as its consummation." The deathless is just another word for *nirvāṇa*.

So he says here, "Bhikkhus, when the day has receded, and night has approached." The bhikkhu reflects thus: "I could die on account of many causes. A snake might bite me, or a scorpion or centipede might sting me, and I might thereby die. That would be an obstacle to me." In other words, that's not good. "I might stumble and fall, or my food might disagree with me. Or my bile might become agitated. My phlegm might become agitated." So remember, this was in those days where they had the four humors, the four temperaments, the melancholic, sad people, the choleric, the angry ones, the phlegmatic, the easygoing ones, and the sanguine, the happy ones. There's only one of the lot who are happy. Human miseries.

And then he says sharp winds in the night might become agitated. So I don't know what that is. I did look up winds. It is part of a Chinese thing. But also I couldn't help coming across a medical journal which said this: "While farting every day is normal, farting all the time is not. We have excessive flatulence. You have

excessive flatulence if you fart more than 20 times per day. In most cases, excessive farting can be controlled with changes to your diet and lifestyle." Okay, so I just thought I'd give you that little tidbit of good advice, okay?

And then finally said people might attack me and wild spirits might attack me and then I might die. So this would be a disadvantage because remember the preciousness of human life. The whole point about remaining a human being as long as we can is that this is the best place to free ourselves from suffering.

Now, then he says. Then when the bhikkhu has reflected on the possibility of death during the night, he's then supposed to reflect and ask himself, "Do I have any bad unwholesome qualities that have not been abandoned, which might become an obstacle to me if I were to die tonight?" If upon review the bhikkhu knows I have bad unwholesome qualities that have not been abandoned, which might become an obstacle to me if I were to die tonight, then he should put forth extraordinary desire, effort, zeal, enthusiasm, indefatigability, untiringness, mindfulness and clear comprehension to abandon those bad, unwholesome qualities.

Now, this actually reminds me of my own upbringing I think in most Christian circles. You would go to bed with an examination of conscience, that's what it was called in my particular form which was Catholicism, and the idea was of course you'd look back over the day and see where you got angry, where you got nasty, where you got greedy and so on and so forth, and of course you would ask for forgiveness for that.

You can extend that, of course, to how you related to a sense of anxiety. Did you get caught up in it? Did you start getting panicky? Did you know what to do about that? So it's not just on a moral level, but the whole of our habits, the habitudes that we have, and to be aware of them when they come up. And then at the end of the day, we can reflect, well, I should have been quicker there. I could have been a bit more kinder there, and so forth. And then made that determination, you see, tomorrow I will be. So that's what he says here.

And then, of course, the opposite of that. He actually gives a nice little example, a nice little image here. The Buddha is always trying to match an intellectual understanding with some sort of imagery, some sort of imaginative way, because, as he says, some people think that way. Some people think in stories, in images, rather than a straightforward intellectual manner. So he said that we should practice like that, just as one whose clothes or head had caught fire would put forth extraordinary desire, effort, zeal, and so on, to extinguish the fires. So somebody should do that, you see.

Now, for somebody who doesn't have... Oh, yeah, excuse me. There's the opposite, of course. But upon review, the bhikkhu knows I do not have any bad unwholesome qualities that have not been abandoned, which might become an obstacle for me if I were to die tonight. Then the Buddha says he should dwell in the same rapture and joy, training night and day in wholesome qualities.

So remember the wholesome qualities. We can also reflect on that. We don't have to be completely free of unwholesome qualities. We can reflect on the wholesome qualities that we expressed during the day and determine that we will continue to develop them. All these mental states can be developed indefinitely, right? You can become as evil as evil and become as beautiful as beautiful. Mentally beautiful, of course, heart beautiful.

And then, as always, these scriptures, they're not only repetitive, but they also, as it were, reinforce. By being repetitive, they reinforce the teaching. So just as we started off by saying, when day has receded and night has approached. So the final paragraph is, when night has receded and day has approached. So again, it's that recollection in the morning. Very good.

So I think we can put death to bed for a little while. But I would love to hear from you if you happen to practice and just see if it did have a beneficial effect on your life, on your sense of awareness.

So I had a question about how to live frugally. Many people now have found themselves without work, either because the firm has dismissed its workers or you've been furloughed. This is a new word for me, furloughed. I don't quite know. It just means that you're still employed by the firm, but you're not being paid. And many of you know Carl, Carl Fuchs, who teaches here. So he works for the Department of Work and Pensions. And the amount of people applying now for the Dole, what we call the Dole, is enormous. So you may find yourself in that position, of course. And the question is how to live frugally.

I think it's good to remember that we weren't always, the society wasn't always as rich as it has been over these past 20, 25 years. Even after the 2008 crash, unemployment stayed pretty high. The bulk of people did get decent wages. I'm sorry about the West now. Or should we say the rich countries in the West. But it's not that long ago. I mean, World War II, rationing was there for 14 years from the beginning of the war to, I've got the date here, 4th of July, 1954. And that was when food rationing came to an end, when restrictions on the sale of the purchase of meat and bacon was lifted. It was 14 years of people having to be careful, were limited in what they could eat.

And as a child, of course, I would have been a child then, born in 47. I'd been about seven years old. You don't know. You're not aware of being poor or not poor. But in those days, you know, you've got a clip around the ear if you left the light on. If you broke a cup, yeah, your dad would be on to you. That costs money. You know what I mean? It's not going to jump at you. And I do remember my aunties, you know, when we used to go and visit, you get a piece of bread and the jam on it was, well, you wouldn't say there was any jam on it. There was a touch of jam expressing itself on the bread. I remember cucumber sandwiches, really thin, thin little pieces of cucumber. So you don't have to die because you're going to be frugal.

Just in my own case, there was a period there in the 80s when I was unemployed and I was on the dole. And I just remember by that time I was practicing. I was into Buddhism, so I wasn't drinking at that time or anything like that. And I remember, you know, I handled it well. Well, I was rather lucky, really,

because I went to live in a lodging where they allowed me just to make a donation, basically. I was very fortunate. And I remember eating a lot of awful, you know, liver and kidney and beginning to feel a bit ill about it. It was about that time I decided to go vegetarian. But there wasn't much on the market then for vegetarian food.

And I just got used to living frugally. So you can't go out and just buy stuff, as you might have done at one point. You just live simply. And, of course, we've forgotten that. There's a whole generation that have forgotten how to live frugally.

Even as a child, I remember waking up in the morning. There was no heat in the house. The old man had to go downstairs and build a fire. And on weekends, I'd be down there with him, screwing up paper and putting coal on top. And you'd get up in the freeze, especially winter. There'd be ice on the window, and you didn't bother. You just got up, you washed your face, you went down, and the kitchen was the only place that was warm. And they had three kids, three of us bundling in there and making a bit of a row. And that was the only warm place, the kitchen. By evening, of course, mum had built the fire and all that, so it was a bit more pleasant.

But central heating for us didn't come until the mid-60s, and for many came in much later. So you can get used to a situation. You can get used to that. I mean, it's the same as coming on retreat. You change all your habits. It's difficult the first two or three days, and that's it.

The horror story for me, of course, would be, well, as you know, no toast, but worse. Worse, no soya milk or oatly to put in my tea. I mean, that brings up almost a panicky sort of feeling.

And I remember too kids coming to school with no socks and things like that, a bit scruffy. Even though you had three changes. You had one for your ordinary messing about clothes. You had your school uniform, if your parents could afford it. And you had your Sunday best. That was it. I remember being a student. I only had, I think, two or three shirts. So, you know, it's like realising that you don't need all this.

How can we approach a situation where we find we don't have the money that we used to have? And it really is just drawing up a list of what you actually need, as opposed to want, which might not be particularly greedy. You might want another shirt or another piece of dress. But when you look around, you don't need it. And it's just really bring yourself down to need.

Now, for the monastic life, the Buddha had these, what we call the four requisites. And you had to be happy with what you were given. This is the idea. And in those days, you often ended up with the very simplest of things. So, for instance, we're supposed to be happy with whatever is put into the bowl. And I remember when I was in Thailand once, we went out to the villages. And when we came back, there was only rice. Very poor, extremely poor, just a bit of rice. And I think they put in a bit of the fish to get out of the ponds. It wasn't fish, it was something else, which I won't forget, frankly. But luckily, when we got back to the monastery, the middle class from the towns had brought some delicious food. But if I had lived

deep into the places in Thailand at that time, so going back to the late 80s, you'd have had to be happy with just rice. So that was the first thing.

For shelter, that's another thing. So you need shelter. The four basic requisites are food, shelter, clothing and medicine. I mean, that's what the body needs. We're not talking about what the heart or the mind needs, but what the body needs. That's all.

And when it came to shelter was just to be happy under the root of a tree or to build yourself a temporary shelter. Later on, monasteries were built for the Buddha, so they became a bit more flashy. But you're just to be happy with the place you're living in, basically. Now, having said that, we know that there are people out there on the streets, and that's, of course, an abomination, frankly, for a rich country. Absolute abomination.

And then there's clothing. Now, the clothing is just to protect the body from heat, in India from flies and gadflies and mosquitoes and stuff like that. And of course, for modesty's sake. But that's your basic need is to clothe the body so it doesn't get cold in this country anyway. It doesn't matter what you're actually wearing, does it? As long as it keeps you warm. It doesn't have to be fashionable.

And finally, medicine. In those days, you had to be, what the scripture says, the Buddha says is that you have to be happy with fermented cow's urine. Now, frankly, I never tried it. I never got around to doing that. And I'm not so sure anybody else has since those times. But obviously, that was considered to be a medicine. And just happy with the medicine that comes.

Now, it might be that you end up with the NHS with a minor or serious complaint, serious disease. And we know it's actually being so heavily used. It's at breaking point constantly. The nurses, the doctors have been completely overworked. And so you might find yourself not being treated well or not being treated for quite some time. And you have to accept that. There's no point in getting angry about it. That doesn't do anything, does it? Anxiety will be there, of course, if you feel you have something serious. But that's basically what you have to accept. Fermented cow's urine. I'm sure it's good for you.

So thinking about frugality, seeing what the need is. When it comes to the heart-mind, really to keep the mind active, to keep feeding it. Now, these days, there's so much free materials on the websites. It really doesn't have to cost you anything. Free book downloads from, what is it, the Gutenberg Project on Google, things like that. And of course, there are still, I believe, one or two libraries around. And of course, conversation, good conversation with friends.

And the heart needs also to be nourished. There's not just the social virtues of compassion, love and all that, conversation with people, but art, art and nature. We need that sort of feed. I mean, it's one of those things that monasteries, the meditation monasteries, are often way out in the forests to get out there away from the city jungle and into a beautiful place. So one has to accept that as part of a frugality. Now, in the old days, you might have done all sorts of things that cost money, but there's plenty of stuff out there that

wouldn't cost anything.

So it's looking after the body, principally, of course, because you can't be here without one. And then taking care of the heart, mind, culture, all that sort of stuff. So in this way, we can live with frugal times.

And I put here, and the least costly of all, of course, is spiritual practice. All you need is the space of your own body and sit down and carry on.

So I hope that these little hints, I always like to have some feedback. If you're doing the actual practices, feedback about what your thoughts are. Email, please, because I don't actually read this stuff coming down. I can't speak and read it. There's a lot coming through. Julie here says there's a detailed description.

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