The Five Remembrances: Contemplating Aging, Sickness, and Death

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 39:39

These are the five remembrances that the Buddha says will really awaken our desire to practice. The idea is that we're not thinking about it so much as getting into the feel of these things.

In our death-phobic culture, we don't like to think about these things. For instance, every morning I'm sure we all wake up presuming, without any shadow of a doubt, that we will actually live throughout the day. There's no logical reason for believing that, because as you know, accidents happen, things happen, we can die just on a whim. But we don't remind ourselves. What this is trying to do is say, look, every morning when you wake up, the first contemplation is to rejoice that you've actually woken up, and then to remind yourself that this could be the last day, one way or another, or at least you could fall seriously ill. Definitely you'll be getting older — there's no way you can get around that. The sickness contemplation is a preparation for terminal sickness if we have one, and it's also just basically recognising that the body can fall ill.

There's the ageing contemplation, and lots of things that the Buddha says about death. Death is inescapable. Everybody must die. Remember, the reminder that your lifespan is decreasing continuously — that's a nice little reflection. And death will come regardless of whether or not we have made time to practice the Dharma. Wealth cannot help. All this is little ways in which he encourages us. And then number four is recognising that in the end we part and are separated from everyone and everything dear and agreeable to us. And then finally, there's the contemplation of *kamma*.

There are two ways of doing this. One way is just to repeat the sentence into your heart, getting the feel of what your reaction is. You might say, "This body is subject to disease. This body, this body is subject to disease. This body is subject to disease." You play with the words to try and get some sort of recognition of its truth value. And what you're interested in is how you're reacting to it — either with a sense of anxiety, fear, and so on.

Now you can up the ante by actually bringing to mind those things that you're particularly afraid of. So "this body is subject to disease" and it could be Alzheimer's, or it could be a paralysing neurological disease, or it could be cancer. We've always got something that really worries us. And if you bring that to mind, again you're looking at your fear. This is the self not wanting to die, not wanting to fall ill, not wanting to age. In getting in contact with that, as soon as those feelings come, be open to them, receive them, accept that this is the way our relationship is to this. And then just allow it to evaporate a little bit.

When the fear, the grief, the aversion comes, it's easier to accept it if you receive it with a sense of care. There's a part of the heart that is not particularly happy and not feeling well, and you would hug it, shall we say, as you would a child who's suffering one of these mental states. So there are two ways — just repeating the phrase, which is what it says in the *Visuddhimagga*, the Path of Purification by Buddhaghosa, or you can also use your imagination to get in touch with how we feel about these things.

We just repeat these things to ourselves — ageing and then death. And then there's that one about parting, being separated from everyone. Here again, you can say it in different ways. You can bring to mind what it is you are most attached to and what it will be a pain to leave. You can also extend that to being parted from everyone because they're leaving you. People die, people leave. And again, you can use your imagination — what does that mean to you?

Then finally kamma, which has a certain brightness to it. We are the owners of our actions. We do possess our own actions. We are responsible for them — body, speech, and mind. Here we've got the ones that are unwholesome, but also the ones that are wholesome. We get either the upcomings of something we've done which is unskilful, or we get the reward of doing something which is skilful. We inherit the results. We're born out of our kamma. It's always with us. Our relationships are formed through our kamma. In fact, you could say that, relatively speaking, that's what we are — we are our relationships. And you depend on them. You depend on your kamma.

You always have to balance these negative reflections with something positive. Gratitude for being born, your mother, your family, your father, friends, your upbringing and education. We bring that to mind — all the medical practitioners who've helped you, all the gifts of our society, of our culture, the world, of nature. And then finally, just to remind ourselves that this life is precious, that here the Buddha says we have this combination of joy and woe, and the intuitive intelligence sharp enough to find our way out of *saṃsāra*, the world of constantly going round and round. And finally, just the preciousness of the Dhamma.

As we practise this, what we're doing is moving from an intellectual understanding of these statements into a heart acceptance — a sense of them being digested. When we accept the truth value of these things, the gift is a feeling of safety, a feeling of equanimity. That allows us to feel inwardly more serene, just this acceptance of the way things are, and the fact that we have very little control over sickness, ageing, and death. It's just allowing that thought to be accepted within the heart. That's the thing.

If you do this exercise, you don't have to do it for so long in the morning — it can be almost one of the first things you do before you even sit. After a while, just reading them through is enough. It's enough to put you into that right mindset of not being surprised if something goes wrong during the day.

According to the Buddha, just the contemplation of death — never mind all the *vipassanā* and all the other practices — just contemplating death is a path to *Nibbāna*. That's how incisive, how wonderful it can be just to do that. And the paradox is that everything becomes precious. Life becomes absolutely more wonderful because of it.

There's a book by a man called Becker called *The Denial of Death*, and he goes into what happens when we deny it, when we're in a state of aversion to it. It's really interesting how money is somehow connected to the aversion to death, getting as much as we can to preserve ourselves. And the other one, which of course we do know from COVID, is that our going to the toilet is part of death, because all our waste is dead. That's why during COVID everybody went out and bought loads of toilet paper. So that's what happens if we don't contemplate death — we spend a lot of money on toilet paper.

I hope my words or this little practice has been of some assistance and that it will help you in your journey towards full liberation from all suffering.

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