The Contemplation of Death

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 25:14

Greetings everyone, this wonderful full moon celebration of November.

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

Well, I'm going to start with a quote from St. Paul. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" A letter he wrote to the Corinthians.

I was brought up a Roman Catholic and November is a month where the souls in purgatory are remembered. In Catholic doctrine, there are three realms. There's hell. And if you get in there, you're stuck. There's no way out. And then there's heaven, which, of course, is very blissful. And that's where you want to really get stuck. But there's this in-between place where, well, you weren't that bad in life. You don't deserve hell. But on the other hand, you're not clean enough to get into heaven. You've got to really purify the heart. So this was the purpose of Purgatory.

Now, in the purgatorial realm, you might suffer just as much as hell, but the distinction is you know the way out. Now, whether these realms actually exist or not is not important. They definitely do mirror mental states. So when you're in hell, in those times when everything falls apart, when the whole world seems to be against you and you don't see a way out, well, that's hell, isn't it? And we know certain illnesses, certain mental states, driving people, for instance, to suicide. All these are hellish states. And heaven, of course, are those wonderful little times when we feel perfectly happy and the world seems to be supporting us. But I think I can safely say that for most of the time, life is purgatory. And this, of course, is the meaning of *dukkha*. It's somehow not entirely satisfactory.

So in the tradition, in the Roman Catholic tradition, a month was set aside, November. Now, November doesn't have the colour of autumnal October, and it definitely hasn't got the promise of December. So it's a month which is dark, dank, at least in these climes. And it's devoted, it's a lovely month to devote to thinking about our ancestors, people who died, et cetera. And that we can do. But I thought this happy idea came to me that this would be a wonderful month every year to contemplate death. Now, I know you're very excited about that idea.

So we have to begin at the beginning. And I've written one or two things here. So when we talk about the beginning of time, we're not talking really, I'm not talking here about time in the past, when time began. I'm talking about every single moment of consciousness. Just in that absolute moment of beginning, we become, we fall into an identity of what it is we're actually experiencing, which is, of course, through this

psychophysical organism. And herein, just in this understanding, is the fear of death. Right there, at the end point of that consciousness, is the letting go of a moment of being awake, and that point there is the point of death.

Unfortunately, these series of conscious moments are so quick that they all seem to run together, giving us an impression of continuity. And of course, in that moment, too, there is also the destruction of fear.

Now, the Buddha tells us that the contemplation of death is the most powerful of all contemplations. But we are actually reaching down to the very foundation stone of our delusion, this delusion of identity, the delusion of self. And if there's one thing that the self does not want to do is it does not want to die.

And here he is, this is what he says about it. "Disciples, mindfulness of death, when developed and pursued, is of great fruit and great benefit. It gains a footing in *Nibbāna*, the deathless. Has *Nibbāna*, the deathless, as its final end." *Nibbāna* here is, of course, that transcendent dimension. What's he actually saying here? He's saying that if we really contemplate this whole idea of death, this notion of death that we have, we will get a glimpse of what *Nibbāna* actually is. That's the footing, a glimpse. And if we continue to do it, this path alone, I mean, this is what he's saying, just the contemplation of death will actually bring us to the end of *dukkha*, the end of suffering, right? And it'll be done at that point where that whole notion, that whole concept of self completely disappears.

Now, I do mention a book here by Ernest Becker. It's called "The Denial of Death" that was written in 1973. And it is still a smashing read and well worth buying and having a look at it. And what he says is the basic motivation of human behaviour is our biological need to control our basic anxiety, to deny the terror of death. Now that says it perfectly. I'll repeat that because it's such a, it gets it straight on. The basic motivation for human behaviour is our biological need, physical need to control our basic anxiety, to deny the terror of death.

And that exactly leads us to those three basic attitudes that come out of that delusion of believing we are this body, heart and mind. The one is, of course, gathering, acquiring. The more we have more money, more power, more riches, the more safe we feel. Safety, that's what we're searching for, safety. And of course, if anything undermines that, then they become the enemy, the rivals, the enemy. We've got to get rid of them. And if they happen to be bigger than us, we've got to run.

So these three fundamental attitudes of acquisitiveness, fear, and aversion are coming out of that fundamental delusion of self. And I like it when he says it's a biological, it's a physical need, right? Because without a body, you're not here. So this fear roots itself in the body.

Now, here's the Buddha asking his monks, well, how often should we meditate on death? So on one occasion, this is paraphrased, on one occasion, the Buddha asked several monks, "How often do you contemplate death?" And one of them replied, "Well, I contemplate death every day, Lord." He said, "That's not good enough." And then he asked another monk and he said, "How often do you contemplate death?"

He said, "Well, I contemplate death with each mouthful I eat during a meal." "It's not good enough." And then he turned around to another and he said, "What about you?" And he said, "Well, I contemplate death with each in-breath and out-breath." And the Buddha smiled and he was pleased.

So, of course, we can't be always thinking about death all the time. I mean, completely all the time. But as you know, in medieval times, death was very obvious. I mean, people died in front of you. And they always kept death. It was a habit to keep a memento mori, a reminder of death, which was normally some little skull or something, kept on a table by the bedside or whatever it could be easily seen. So you could catch your eye and it would just come up just that moment. There is an end to my life. And every day shortens the period by where I'm going to actually reach this point.

So that's, now, when we're thinking about the actual moment of death, that's all it is, isn't it? You could be shocked, somebody could throw you under a bus, for instance, and just in that shocking moment, you'd be breathing in, wouldn't you? And then you'd be dead. On the other hand, you could be just breathing out, just your last breath. You could just letting go. And at the end of the out-breath, there's death.

So every time you're sitting in meditation, just knowing that the in-breath ends and the out-breath ends is to keep us in touch with the idea that everything vanishes. Everything comes to an end. And this body will die. This person will die. And of course, if we keep constantly distracting ourselves, always finding something to do, something to achieve, something, we're just going to be taken by surprise.

I mean, what would our last thoughts be? I mean, just consider, just consider. You're sitting at breakfast there and you're holding a piece of toast and it's saturated, dripping with hot butter and layers of marmalade. And as you raise it to your mouth, suddenly you have a heart attack. Can you imagine the agony? What would you do? Would you go for a final bite or would you sit there calmly, knowing and just letting that toast drop and falling away into death?

Now, on the other hand, we have a story of a Zen monk, it's only an apocryphal story, falling over a cliff, hanging on by his nails for dear life and having the time to admire, sneaking from a cranny, a little wildflower. That's how we want to go, isn't it? Calm, peaceful, with joy in our hearts. Why not? Why not?

The Buddha says there are four types of people. There are those who wake up to death, who wake up to the idea of death, the immediacy of death, even upon hearing the word very early on in life. And there are those who don't wake up until someone dear to them dies. I remember when my mother and father died, I was telling the family that I'm next. And there are those who wake up when lots of people die. So, I mean, this whole catastrophe that's happened around COVID with people dying here and there in that first wave, that really created a lot of fear and anxiety in society. And the final one, of course, is when, or the worst case scenario is to suddenly wake up to the whole notion of death when the doctor tells you you've got six weeks to live. That's called being unprepared for a terminal shock.

So, but no matter how ready we are for death, it'll always come with a shock. Because so long as the self is

there, there's always that residue, no matter how small, of fear. But now that we've got this war right on our doorstep, and of course the war's going on all over the place, consider the soldier, what he must have to brace himself for. He goes in with his machine gun and whatnot, but I mean, he knows that he could be shot. So there's always that wonderful ability to be able to be open to the idea that you're going to die. And it's one of those things I think that a soldier who goes in with proper intention has the ability to turn it into a spiritual practice.

Anyway, how do we do it? So this is the big question, isn't it? How do we actually do this contemplation on death? Now, contemplation is not the same as thinking, right? We're not going to sit here thinking about death. What is death? What does it mean? Where is it going? What will happen to me when I die? That's a complete waste of time.

What we're going to do is to use a phrase, use a mantra. You can choose a passage, but anything which brings up the feelings, the attitudes we have around death. And as we repeat these phrases, we're getting in touch with the resistance, not wanting to accept the truth value of it. And it's being able to keep on saying it, keep on saying it gently into the heart until you get that surrender. And then there's that digestion that comes into the heart of the whole idea of sickness, aging and death.

Sickness, of course, is a prelude to death. And aging is just a slow, miserable death, which I am now coming to, such as myself. And as we practice this, and that openness comes to that, and we surrender to the truth of that, you might find that there's a wonderful relief, and even a smile appears on the face. And then there's that ability to hold it with a gentle kindness, with a gentle kindness. And there's always that sense of humour about it. I mean, the whole situation is ridiculous. You get born, you do all this work and then you drop dead. If you remember the old comedian joke, life's hard and then you die. Samuel Beckett says it beautifully in his own inimitable way: "We are born astride a grave."

So what I'm going to do is give you these sentences. And what you do is just repeat them gently within your heart. We're going to do it for about a good half minute each. It sounds long, but you'd be surprised how quickly it passes.

So first of all, there's the sickness, which is a preparation for death. You can look upon it as a preparation for death. The body manifesting its vulnerability. So there's discomfort or pain and there's always some disability. And this contemplation undermines this intoxication with youth of always trying to stay young, of always being 60 as the new 40, things like that. So sickness is unpreventable. The body is going to fall sick to some degree or another in our lifetimes. Hopefully, of course, it will be something which passes.

So these are the three sentences. The body is subject to disease. The body is of a nature to fall ill. This body has not gone beyond sickness. So I'll say them again and then I'll create a break for you to just keep repeating it.

This body is subject to disease. Repeating it gently into the heart. This body is subject to disease.

[pause]

This body is of a nature to fall ill.

[pause]

This body has not gone beyond sickness.

[pause]

The next set of phrases are to do with aging, which is, of course, as I say, a progressive dying. This undermines the obsession with health and beauty, with intolerances and fasting and food ingredients. It's the obsession with it all. So aging, of course, is inevitable.

So again, the three phrases: this body is subject to aging. This body has not gone beyond aging. This body is now in the process of aging. So again, we just repeat these phrases into our hearts, observing any resistance, feeling the resistance, just allowing the resistance to manifest and wait for it to die until we surrender to the truth of the statement.

This body is subject to aging.

[pause]

This body has not gone beyond aging.

[pause]

This body is now in a process of aging.

[pause]

Life is uncertain, death is certain. This contemplation undermines the overwhelming clinging to life at all costs, shoring it up, barricading it with fame, riches, and power. It is inescapable. Everyone must die. The remainder of our lifespan is decreasing continually. Death will come regardless of whether or not we have made time to practice Dharma. We don't know when we are going to die. These are all phrases from the Buddha. We don't know when we're going to die. Human life expectancy is uncertain. There are many causes of death and the human body is fragile. Only the practice of Dharma can help us at the time of death. Our wealth cannot help us. Our loved ones cannot help us. Our own body cannot help us. Death is inescapable.

These are the phrases to repeat. This body is subject to death. This body has not gone beyond death. This body will die.

This body is subject to death.

[pause]

This body has not gone beyond death.

[pause]

This body will die.

[pause]

There is a final contemplation which links into this, which is about *kamma*. And it's recognising that we own our actions. We inherit the results of our actions. We are born because of our actions into every moment. We're related through our actions. And we live dependent upon our actions. So whatever good or ill I do, I shall inherit the results. That's a nice little thing just to repeat.

Having done these exercises, you might think, oh, well, so I get a footing in *Nibbāna*. I might get a little hint of what *Nibbāna* actually is. And if I do it often enough and with real sincerity, I might even be liberated. But is that all? Not at all. There are amazing benefits to be had right through this practice of contemplation.

First of all, there's that relief that comes from the acceptance of the inevitable. We simply stop fighting. So much energy is lost, pushing thoughts and feelings away. This energy is now released in order to do better things with it. The underlying fear of sickness, aging and death puts a pall over our lives. Now life becomes more colourful. We appreciate it more. We regain some of the childlike wonder of the miracle of life. It's as though somebody's pulled up a blind in a room that we didn't think was dark.

Now, with this, there comes gratitude. And from out of that gratitude, a desire to share our joys and comfort others, share our joys with others, to share our joys and to comfort others in their sorrow. Accepting death as part of the life cycle, we're more at ease by someone's dying bedside.

And it brings us sharply into the present, to the arising and passing away of every moment, and to the realization that within all this change is the unchangeable, the unconditioned, the beatitude of *nibbāna*.

So that is why in *vipassanā* we investigate *anicca*, impermanence, one of the three characteristics of existence. It leads to the realization that to hold on to anything is illusory and bound to bring some level of dissatisfaction. And it leads us to realize the insubstantiality of the self, once so solid, but now just arising and passing away with every moment of consciousness.

You'll find lots of books if you want to find them somewhere by various writers.

So what's the practice in daily life? Well, it's putting aside just a few moments in the morning. You could do it just after the sitting, before *mettā*. It's nice to do before *mettā*, I think. In which you just repeat those phrases gently into your heart.

These sorts of contemplations work over time. They're not something that works just because you've done it once. Even if you were to do it all day, which would be a good idea, the effect would disappear. It has to be done every day, for every day of our lives. Just that little reminder. And it is a really powerful practice.

I want to leave you with a little film. It's not a very good quality at all, but it does get across the inevitable and the shortness of our life. We don't realize how short it is until it's nearly over. But it's amazing how time passes and it does.

I can only hope that my words have been of some assistance, that they have not caused confusion, and that by your daily practice of the contemplation of ageing, sickness, and death you will reach your liberation sooner rather than later.

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