

As Winter Approaches

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Traditionally, November is the month of the dead, the 'Holy Souls' in Christian understanding. It's a time to remember those we have lost. I am especially remembering my mum who died in January. She used to love this time of year - closing the curtains early and looking forward to long evenings by the fireside. For many people November has the opposite effect. As the days get shorter and the sunlight fades a gloomy depression mounts. It's humbling to see our dependence on physical basics like daylight and sunshine for optimism and good humour. It's also an opportunity to reflect on the teaching on the elements – earth, water, air and fire – the basis for bodily experience. Earth represents solidity; we sense this as pressure, hardness, softness, weight. We experience the water element when it spatters into our face as rain, lets eyelids skim over the delicate surface of the cornea. The air element represents movement – we sense this when we turn our head, when the legs swing while we walk. The fire element is responsible for the November blues; changes in temperature and light tell us that this element, like the others, is not to be taken for granted, not ours to have when we want it to discard when we want something else. We're very attached to bodily experience! As a baby it was our main source of pleasure and pain. Later the mental world became more prominent – the pleasure of reading, socializing, achieving, the pain of misunderstanding, rejection, failure. Delusion allows our mental life to take over the show; like James Joyce's Mr. Duffy, most of us live "at a little distance from our bodies". The fading of heat and light at this time of year provides a wake-up-call. Warmth is the vital sign of life while light has spiritual as well as physical significance – near death experiences often report moving through a dark tunnel towards light. No wonder we are so deeply attached! To go to the root of the problem we need to rediscover the pleasure and pain of the embodied life, rest attention on cold toes or warm hands. There's the simple physicality of warmth or coolness; there's also the overlay of commentary, liking, disliking, desire & aversion. As we watch, the overlay simplifies down, and when conditions are right, stops. What a relief! An easy intimacy grows, but so delicate! It shatters with any grumbling for more heat, brighter light ... Slowly and painfully we learn to drop our preferences, be grateful for whatever sensations the body offers. These sensations provide our footing in reality, a welcome counterpoint to the unending chit-chat of the mind. With our feet planted firmly in reality, our true nature can take shape. I like to remember my mum's November evenings when she gladly turned away from the hustle and bustle of life to rest by her fireside, read her books. I can follow her lead, retreat into my body, let it become my focus for winter evenings, curl up with the book of Dhamma – the real-life one printed on direct experience. The chapter on the elements is always a good place to start. What better way to greet the cold, dark days of November than by learning to love the vibrant stimulation we term 'cold', discovering peace in darkness? Thanks for the memories, Mum.

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