

The Contemplation of Death

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 25:10

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

So the title of this is Death. A happy subject. I've started off here with a quote from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"

Now, it also reminds me, of course, of my Roman Catholic upbringing. In that doctrine, there are three realms. There's hell, from which you never escape. That's bad news, isn't it? And there's heaven, from which you never want to escape. But there's this little in-between place called purgatory. It's because most of us don't die with terrible sins on our hearts. We just need a little place where we get smacked about a bit and then we're ready to move up into the heavenly realms.

Now whether these realms actually exist or not, as you can say for any of these religions with their realms—the Buddhists have hundreds of them—the fact is they do mirror our mental states. So hell, of course, are those times in our lives when things fall apart, everything's going wrong, we lose our work, everything looks really bad, especially, for instance, people who are suffering from this COVID business. And heaven are those wonderful little moments when really this is the life. We're out there and we're really enjoying it. But most of our time, or at least it's true for me, is that in-between place of purgatory, where I'm not so happy and I'm not so sad.

So the reason I mention this is because in the Roman Catholic religion, November is a special time. It's a funny month. It doesn't have the colour of October and it doesn't have the promise of December. It's a dowdy month, dank, getting darker and this was a month that was dedicated to the holy souls. These were the people who'd ended up in purgatory and who would eventually rise to heavenly joy, and we could help them by praying for them. These were little shots of grace that would help them to generate the energy they needed.

So it occurred to me that this would be a wonderful full moon dedicated to the contemplation of death. Now, I know you're very excited by this, I'm sure of it.

If we now consider that actually death is right with us at every moment, at the beginning of time. Now, when we say the beginning of time, we're not talking about historical time, we're talking about this moment arising and passing away. What is arising and passing away? Moments of consciousness. Each moment of consciousness has a moment of initial delusion. And then it finishes and that delusion finishes.

That essential delusion, of course, is to do with identity. And here is the corner, here is the basic reason for our fear, our terror of death. And therein lies the destruction of that fear.

Now here's what the Buddha says. He tells us about contemplation which he says is the most powerful of all contemplations because it reaches down to that very foundation stone of delusion—the self-identity. There's one thing the self doesn't want to do, and that is die.

This is what he says: "Monks, mindfulness of death when developed and pursued is of great fruit and great benefit. It gains a footing in *Nibbāna*, the deathless, and has *Nibbāna*, the deathless, as its final end." Now, what's he saying there? He's saying that if we contemplate death, we'll have a glimpse of *Nibbāna*. That's the footing, a glimpse of it. And if we continue to contemplate our deaths, it'll actually lead us to the end of death, to the experience of that which doesn't die—the deathless, the *amatādhama*, the deathless truth.

Now, I like to quote Ernest Becker, who wrote this wonderful book called "The Denial of Death." It's still a smashing read. He wrote it in 1973. He got the Pulitzer Prize for this. But there's a line in that which captures it all: "The basic motivation for human behavior is our biological need to control our basic anxiety, to deny the terror of death."

We've seen this with COVID. The enormous terror, the fear, people locking themselves away, wearing masks, doing all sorts. And of course, there was a certain reason for that. People were actually dying. But for most people who got COVID, it was just a very nasty type of flu. But even so, this basic motivation for human behavior sits right there underneath everything—this fear that we're going to die at any moment. Dying on the in-breath, dying on the out-breath. And that's why the Buddha points to it as the most powerful. This is the only contemplation where he says you can actually experience *Nibbāna*. So you can throw away all this *vipassanā* stuff and all that, *mettā* and all that—just sit there from now on contemplating death and you'll make it. That's how powerful it is.

Now, how often should we contemplate death? So here's the Buddha asking the question. This is a paraphrase. The Buddha asked several monks, "How often do you contemplate death?" And one of them replied, "Lord, I contemplate death every day." Not good enough, the Lord wasn't happy with that. Then he asked another one and he said, "Well, I contemplate death with every mouthful I take at a meal." Not good enough, said the Buddha. And then he turns to another and he says, "What about you?" And he says, "Well, I contemplate death with each in-breath and out-breath." Ah, now the Buddha was pleased.

In other words, you do it all the time. Now, you can't actually do it all the time. You can't be thinking about death while you're adding up your bills. It would be awful. It's more in the sense of it's always there as a background. It's always there sitting on your shoulder. And as you know, in medieval times, it was quite regular to have a *memento mori*, a reminder of death on your desk, on your shelf, by your bedside, just somewhere where the eye would catch it every so often. And it would just remind you, OK, in the end, there is death.

Of course, if we constantly ignore that, if we constantly ignore death and distract ourselves from it, then it'll just take us by surprise. I mean, I have this terrible fear that I will be holding a piece of toast just dripping with margarine and layered with great big topping of marmalade, and holding it up like this so I can see it and I can begin to enjoy this lovely aroma, and suddenly I get a heart attack. Now what am I going to do? Am I going to actually make the effort to take that one last bite, or will I be able to just drop the whole damn toast? Who knows?

There is a lovely example from the Zen tradition where a monk flips over or falls over a cliff and he's hanging there by his fingernails, but he has time to admire, peeping from a cranny, this wonderful golden flower.

The Buddha also talks about these four types of people. He says there are people who wake up, that's how he puts it, as soon as they hear even the word of death. Then there are those who don't wake up until somebody close—your mother, your father, somebody dies who is close to you. There are those who don't wake up until lots of people have died. I think all these deaths caused by COVID have had some effect, especially on young people. We seem to be getting a lot of 20 to 30 year olds coming to meditate. There's an awakening. And then of course the most unfortunate is to wake up to death when the doctor tells you you've got six weeks. You definitely don't want that. That is definitely a terminal shock.

So our work is really to get ready. And you could say that every time you meditate, you are actually preparing yourself for your death.

Without any further ado, we can do these contemplations. Contemplation is not thinking about it. So we're not sitting there saying, "Death, I wonder what it means. Where will I go? I wonder where I'll be reborn." No, it's nothing to do with that. It's to do with getting down to our relationship with death, which is always in the heart. The fear, the terror, the aversion, it's always down here in the heart somewhere.

So what we do is we repeat these phrases slowly, and we're centering in on the heart and we're noticing any aversion, any pushing away, any fear, anything at all. And we're just waiting for that to begin to dissolve. And if you keep saying it, you keep saying it, "This body is subject to death." This body. Is subject to death. This body is subject to death. This body is subject to death. So you play around with it and very slowly you just get that feeling of surrender, surrendering to the truth. And that resistance vanishes, and with it there comes that lovely sense of relief and then even a smile. You can even laugh because you've suddenly realised that there is no monster under the bed. It's not something to be afraid of. It's just something that's going to happen anyway.

That's the important thing about mantra, about contemplation practice. Those of you who've done mantra, those who've done contemplative prayer will understand that. But others won't have done this really. We're going to do very regular ones, but eventually you can find a phrase, you can find a passage in a book, and you just keep reading it. You don't think about it, you just keep reading it to get the feel of it, how you're relating to it.

Here we go, and we're going to do three of the messengers from the gods that awoke the Buddha to his path. Of course, this is a mythical way of what actually happened to him as a young man. He's out, he's been brought up in this luxurious palace, he goes out, he sees for the first time somebody who's terribly ill, a very old person, and a corpse. But he also sees somebody sitting under a tree—an ascetic under a tree—which gives him the hope that in fact there's an escape from sickness, aging and death. So that's what we're going to do. We're just going to repeat these to ourselves.

Make sure you feel settled.

Sickness is a mini-death, it's a preparation for death. The body manifests its vulnerability. There's discomfort or pain, and there's some disability. This contemplation undermines our intoxication with youth. This is the Buddha. It undermines our intoxication with staying young, to always being 60 when you're 40, always being 30.

So sickness is unpreventable. Just repeating gently into our hearts: This body is subject to disease. This body is of a nature to fall ill. This body has not gone beyond sickness.

Aging is a progressive dying. Contemplating aging undermines the obsession with health and beauty, with intolerances, with fasting, food ingredients and all that other stuff. Aging is inevitable. Just repeating into our hearts: This body is subject to aging. This body has not gone beyond aging. This body is now in a process of aging.

Some quotes from the Buddha, taken from parts of the scriptures and the *Dhammapada*:

Life is uncertain. Death is certain. It undermines the overwhelming clinging to life at all costs, to shoring it up, barricading it with fame, riches and power. Death 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. Human life expectancy is uncertain. There are many causes of death. The body is very 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 body cannot help us. Death is inescapable.

Repeating gently into the heart: This body is subject to death. This body has not gone beyond death. This body will die.

Now usually tagged onto that are the contemplations about *kamma*: I own my actions. I inherit the results of my actions. I am born of my actions. I'm related through my actions. I live dependent on my actions. And whatever I do, for good or for ill, I shall inherit the results. So that's something we can always add on.

Now, if we get into that practice just for every morning, it's just a little reminder. It can be just half a minute, it can be five minutes, it doesn't really matter. And it has that effect on our lives.

The first one is that sense of relief that comes with the acceptance of the inevitable. We simply stop fighting. There's so much energy pushing away those thoughts about death, about falling ill, about COVID, and that energy is all released. The underlying fear of sickness, aging and death puts a pall over our lives. Now you can see life is much more colorful. We appreciate it more. We regain some of that childlike wonder, the miracle of life, being conscious.

Now with that there comes a sense of gratitude, and of course with gratitude always the desire to share our joys and to comfort others in their sorrow. Accepting death as part of life cycle, it's much easier to be with people who are sick. There's a much easier compassion for them and it's so much easier to see somebody who is dying. They don't represent for us something that we are afraid of anymore.

The big thing about it too is that it does bring us into the present. If you've had a shock like you've fallen off a ladder or you've nearly missed being run over, then that really brings you into the present moment, the arising and passing away of every present moment. And it's within that moment that there may come just a glimpse or a realization of what is not changing, not conditioned. That is the beatitude of *Nibbāna*.

And of course, that's why we practice *Vipassanā*—to keep us in touch with this impermanence. And when we're in touch with impermanence, we can see that holding on to anything is going to be illusory. It's bound to cause dissatisfaction because it disappears. And it also leads us to understand that anything we feel is substantial, that it has some sort of base of permanency—the sense of self—it can't be real. It's an illusion, a delusion.

So that's the benefits that we can get from it. And by practicing it as a constant, it eventually has an effect on us, just like practicing *mettā* has an effect on us. But it's this constant practice, just a little moment every day, just after the *vipassanā*, before the *vipassanā*, it doesn't really matter. But just that constant little reminder, and it just brings a spice into our life, which is, of course, very strange. You'd think the opposite, you'd think you'd become depressed.

Anyway, I'd like to finish this little talk with a clip, which I think says everything, and which is expressed beautifully by Samuel Beckett. "We are born astride a grave."

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that I have not caused confusion, and that by your regular contemplation of death you will liberate yourself from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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