

# CHAPTER NINE

## *MEDITATION ON DEATH (MARANASSATI) EXPLANATION AND INSTRUCTION*

THIS EVENING WE are going to reflect on death. It is another type of reflective meditation practised with mindfulness meditation. This is the last of the four supportive meditation we shall introduce in this retreat.

### **ILL-OMENED?**

Death is a subject, which many people prefer not to talk about, especially in other cultures and religions. Many regard discussion about death as ill-omened, unpleasant and luckless. Death as the darkest side of life is considered an inappropriate subject for conversation. People tend to cover their awareness of the reality of death with enormous abstract imaginings and theories. They actually try to suppress that reality in their conscious mind. The mind is thus deceived by intellect. Deception gradually becomes perception. This perception of death, however, seems to have achieved general acceptance.

The Buddha's way of thinking is different and in this case even against the mainstream. He said, "*death is another object for meditation.*" We should recognize, accept and try to understand it. The Buddha taught his disciples that *in order to uproot mental defilement and thereby achieve peace, one should stay vigilant and develop a sharp mindfulness of*

*death*'.<sup>5</sup> Can we run away from death? Certainly not. It is an inevitable process we all have to go through.

People do not like to talk about it because they fear death. This is true of anybody. Some people also think that talking about death may bring ill fate and could destine them for ruin. The Buddha, however, said that the fear of death arises when there is no insight into it. If you do not talk about it, you will not understand it. That is why this meditation on death is meaningful and worthwhile, however fearful it may sound. This Buddhist approach of acceptance is well sympathised, indeed accepted in modern psychotherapy.

## **FEAR OF DEATH**

Imagine this room with no light and in silent darkness. If you come across a wire in the dark, you may think that it is a snake, and you will be very frightened; that is because you cannot see what it is really there. If you come across a cat, you may think that it is a ghost, as you cannot see what is exactly there. You just speculate on the sound of the cat's movements and create fear within yourself. Not seeing things as they are makes you scared. It is oppressive to be in the dark because darkness prevents us from seeing many things. Fear, however, is automatically expelled when the light comes. What we need is light that helps us to see a wire as a wire, and to make sure that it is not a snake. This is also true even when it comes to matters like death; what we have to do is to understand it, to know what it is like and what fear of death is like. Understanding is likened to light.

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<sup>5</sup> *Pathama Maranassati-sutta, the Anguttara-nikaya.*

Many religions, throughout the ages, have tried to solve the mystery of death and of the fear that is necessarily linked to it. They come up with various philosophies as to what death is in order to dispel fear of death in the minds of people. There is always, consciously or unconsciously a threat of death. No matter how you ignore it, this is a fact of life. The Buddha said that we have to have courage to analyze it and reflect upon it. That courage comes through mindfulness. Many religions try to come up with what they think are solutions to solve this psychological problem facing people who live in fear of death.

In pre-Buddhist times in India, people said that when someone died it was just like someone changing clothes, as they did every day. In the same way, the permanent soul was said to keep changing its body, from one to another. They believed in rebirth. Because the idea of rebirth existed even before the Buddha's time. This is emphasized in the early scriptures like the Upanishads. They said that when someone dies and the soul goes to another body, the cycle of birth (*samsara*) goes on. So again, the idea of *samsara* was already there. They said the liberation or *moksha* comes about when that individual soul (each and everybody is considered to have an individual soul) is reunited with the universal soul, which is called *atman*, the everlasting soul. When these two souls merge together there is no longer an individual soul or a universal soul. There is only one. According to the Upanishads, when you see two, you are under an illusion. This is a part of their effort to dispel the fear of death. You have nothing to fear because you are one step closer to becoming reunited with the universal soul which is everlasting. People are afraid of impermanence, of cessation, of disappearance, of going

away. Therefore, they try to come up with an idea of something that is everlasting. Although people are taught to hold on to these ideas based on a belief in something everlasting, still fear does not go away.

In all the Abrahamic religions, like in Judaism, Islam and Christianity, there is one rebirth after death, which is supposed to be after the Day of Judgement \_ where one will be reunited with God, the Creator who will welcome the dead into an immortal state. I see this again as an attempt to dispel fear of death. Fear is real. Fear in you, fear in me, fear in everyone in the street regarding death, is very real. All these philosophies are formulated with one aim: to lessen the fear of the experience of death. At times, all the theories may give people a sense of security in life, but unfortunately they could do very little to help one in the face of actual death. I think the actual problem is not death itself but fear of death. What we are going to do today is discuss the fear of death rather than death itself. Imagine, if we have to live under the shadow of the fear of death throughout our life, how can we enjoy life? Can there be real peace of mind? Before death actually comes, one is already defeated by the fear of it.

Fear of death is a fear of future that results in our not being able to live fully at the present moment. We fear and are worried that we are going to lose what we have, unable to accept that things are impermanent. It hurts and discourages one to think that we have to leave all hard-earned wealth and reputation, and go. The future always seems something uncertain for human beings. Indeed, uncertainty is the whole mark of life after death. Buddhism says that without fully accepting the uncertainties associated with death, life never

feels secure. Life is, of course, naturally insecure. However, it is possible to feel secure amid the insecure provided we develop our mind, dealing with the fear of death here and now when we still have a lot of time to live.

## **THE BUDDHIST APPROACH TO DEATH**

As well as various techniques of meditation including vipassana, there are teachings in Buddhism that help to lessen fear of death such as *kamma* and rebirth. Here, however, we are approaching the problem of fear of death from Vipassana meditation point of view. In the Vipassana meditation, one of the principles is to start looking at things from the best known point and to progress to the less known. What is best known here is *fear*. It exists in you, in me, in every one of us. Therefore, we have to start tackling this fear. We do not start from the *unknown*, which is life after death and all the mystery connected to it. If it is unknown, how can we start with it? What I am trying to say is that despite all these theological concepts, including those in Buddhism \_ the idea of heaven, the idea of Brahma loka, the idea of being born as a human being, which presuppose that there will be at least, in theory life after death \_ enormous fear still surrounds death. So, instead of contemplating the less known such as rebirth, we will start from the best known, that is fear of death. When we understand or comprehend what it is fear, we will not then be fearful of death anymore; as long as we live, we will live happily. That is why we reflect on death.

Another cause of fear is *pride* in day to day life. We are so proud of who we are, of what we have, of what we have achieved as a person or family, that we start behaving as

though we are *not* going to die, that we will have to do whatever necessary to protect what we have achieved. On the other hand, knowing that we have to leave any achievement and go at death looks simply so horrifying. Pride is one of the many aspects of attachments and of not-letting go.

Due to pride, you can also expect tension and conflict even between brothers and sisters and between families. We follow our egoistic tendency by often saying; "*I want to do this and no way will I compromise with that.*" Our pride! Very often we argue over non-essential things in daily life. We do not want to listen to someone's needs and concerns, because we think if we do so, that may be considered as weakness and hurt our pride. That always creates problems psychologically and then socially. Sometimes it is not about right and wrong that we keep arguing with each other, but rather about resistance from within, where we usually claim "*this is my idea, this is my culture.*" So when you are too proud of your culture, you can never enjoy other cultures. That is *pride*. Young people here in this retreat like Tom, Zaw Zaw and Saw Mala, you have the opportunity to enjoy both cultures \_ maybe even more than two. The best thing is to look at things from the Buddhist perspective that nothing is perfect; so no one culture, either Asian or Western, is perfect. Neither is superior to the other. Both have advantages and disadvantages. When we look at life in this way, we gain more than we lose. Otherwise, if we are too proud of Asian culture we will not be able to get anything from Western culture and vice versa. You stand to lose out much that way. This kind of pride is what we are going to tackle through reflection on death.

Lack of the right attitude is another ground where fear of death is bred. In reality, death is very much a part of life; death has to be viewed in the context of life, and life in the context of death. Everything has context and we need to contextualize our outlook. For example, we go to funerals, we see the dead. If we do not view them in the context of life, we do not get the full picture. Looking at life alone can make us forgetful and arrogant, behaving as if we are never going to die.<sup>6</sup> Focussing on death alone can bring us disappointment, negative fear and pessimism. Life and death are the two sides of the same coin.

It is so much relieving to know that death is common to all \_ no matter whether you are a billionaire or a pauper, a ruler or a ruled, a doctor or a patient, a man or a woman, a grown up or a baby. Terrifying and painful experience of death is not unique to anyone nor is it escapable.

Contemplation of death is something that can make one a wise person and enables one to view life seriously. When Sidhartha Gotama was a prince, his father arranged everything so that he would not see old people, sick people and dead bodies. This was because his father, having consulted with his astrologers was told that his son, the prince, would one day leave home for a homeless life; and the king did not want his son to leave home but wanted him to succeed him when he died. So till the age of twenty-nine, he had never seen any of those things. But just to have seen a dead body, an old man and a sick man once, only once, was enough for him to be convinced that this was a real problem

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<sup>6</sup> *The Thana-sutta, the Anguttara-nikaya.*

facing him as well as the rest of the world, including those nearest and dearest to him: his family. That was something that made him determined to go through all the extraordinary experiences, renouncing the princely life, following the well-known religious teachings available in India at that time and undergoing the hard life of an ascetic.

Realizing that death arises at all times while we are still alive in the conventional sense is also very helpful to defeat fear of death. The old cells in the blood die and are being replaced continuously by new ones. It is said that the cells that die and are reborn momentarily are to be in their billions. The mind replaces itself in the same way but in a much quicker speed. This is the law of impermanence, something the Buddha takes it an ultimate truth. Brain cells that do not replace give a clearer explanation of impermanent nature because they only deteriorate without being replaced by new ones. Death in this sense is happening here and now. It is important to see and accept it scientifically.

During the time of the Buddha, Kisa Gotami, a young mother, suddenly lost her only child. She could not and did not accept that her toddler son was now dead. She refused to be convinced by the appeal of common sense reality. She went on looking for a cure to bring him back to life. It was only too understandable that she as a mother would react in the way she did. The child meant everything to her.

The same happened to Patacara, a young lady who lost her two sons, husband and parents within a matter of days so mercilessly and unbelievably. It was too much for her to take.



She had a complete breakdown. She could not accept that such thing had happened to her.

From meditation point of view, the suffering for these two young mothers increased because they did not accept what had really happened but kept rejecting it. The grief was being multiplied anytime they refused to accept it in their mind.

Both had the good fortune of meeting the Buddha in person who could convince them to accept what had happened to them and show them to see the way things are. As we all know from these famous real stories from the Buddhist scriptures, the Buddha very skilfully asked Kisa Gotami to bring mustard seeds to make medicine she was looking for to bring her son back to life. The Buddha said that the seeds must be from a family which has never experienced death. She went out straightaway in search for the seeds only to find that there was no such family that had never experienced death. Kisa Gotami came back to her senses, buried her dead child and returned to the Buddha for the path to the deathless. Both, Kisa Gotami and Patacara accepted what had happened to them and became noble disciples of the Buddha not long after that. Patacara became the one who excelled most among the female disciples in the disciplines of the monastic community (*Vinaya*).

Vipassana meditation is to help us see and accept things as they are and thereby not to create more suffering out of suffering. This is what mindfulness practice is all about. With the presence of sufficient mindfulness, Patacara was able to see the ever-changing world as it was when contemplating on

the river flowing where she was to wash her feet. She was now in harmony with the impermanent world, never expecting it to be otherwise than it was. The desire of *wanting* the world and her life to be in a certain way and *not wanting* them to be in a certain way ceased within her. She had by then stopped resisting the change that was the world. Peace within was achieved in her heart, there and then, while the world went on the way it did. The two young ladies were no longer touched by the world. They did not live beyond the world but certainly above it all just like a lotus flower above water.

## **REFLECTION ON THE REALITY OF DEATH**

Reflection on death helps lessen fear of death and bring peace of mind ultimately. Mindfulness of death, if developed, can help us realize the immortal state (nibbana) here and now. There are many causes of death such as various kinds of diseases and accidents:<sup>7</sup> a man for some reason could just take away the life of another man; an animal can harm you and become a cause of death. While sleeping, eating or working and while being in the sea or land or on air, death can happen at any time. It is not predictable nor is it certain.<sup>8</sup>

The Buddha Gotama recounted to his disciples how Araka, one of the previous Buddhas taught his disciples on how to reflect on death. The Araka Buddha summarized that human Life is short, fleeting, fragile, full of unfulfilled desires and anxiety.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Dutiya Maranassati-sutta, the Anguttara-nikaya.*

<sup>8</sup> *The Salla-sutta, the Sutta-nipata.*

The Araka Buddha, who became enlightened when people had a relatively longer life span than our times, gave many analogies to life. "Life is likened to dewdrop on the tip of a blade of grass that disappears soon after the sun rises. Life is also like dust that is washed away mercilessly by heavy rain. A line drawn with a stick on the surface of water lasts but briefly, even so life is ephemeral. A stream having flowed a great distance in tranquillity, may reach a precipice only to fall down very quickly without a pause. Human life is as little and swift as the stream that falls from the mountain. A strong man, having collected sputum from the floor of his mouth spits it out fleetly and naturally. Life is like a drop of sputum that is done away with by the man. A piece of meat is burnt away very quickly indeed once it is put into a saucepan that has been heated all day. Life is similar to that piece of meat. It lasts but not for long. Once an animal has been selected to be slaughtered, each step it makes helps its advance towards the slaughterhouse; similarly, life moves forward only to death. Once born, none escapes death.<sup>9</sup> One should also reflect that one cannot escape from death and that none in the world does."

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<sup>9</sup> *The Araka Sutta, the Anguttara-nikaya.*

## **INSTRUCTIONS ON THE MEDITATION ON DEATH**

Now we are going to reflect upon the reality of life, especially death. From now on, I will start giving instructions on how to meditate on death. There will be four stages.

### **STAGE ONE**

The first is to remind ourselves about the reality that death is very much a part of our life. The kings and queens, the prime ministers, the presidents, actors, and actresses, the rich and the poor \_ can you imagine that any of them would escape from the process of death? If there is no way to get out of it, why fear? Sometimes when I go to a funeral, I imagine myself to be in the coffin. For many, this would seem something terrible and even stupid. I find it terrible too. However, this is the way I have been taught and I have found that fear of death has actually lessened by doing so. You can also see what is going on in the hearts of the relatives left behind. Now, just reflect whether anyone you have come across \_ the ruler, the ruled, the beautiful, the ugly, men and women, the educated, the uneducated, the academic, the non-academic, the old and the young \_ can get away from this. Death is inevitable for everyone, both the sick and the healthy. Death can happen at any time. There is no guarantee or appointment. Death has no calendar. Because there is no guarantee, we need a lot of insurance. We rush to take insurance and we are often asked, "*Are you insured?*" People would say, "*I'm fully insured. I have got two or even three insurance policies.*" We may feel we need to have even more because the more we think of about the vulnerability of life the

more we can see that life has no insurance. You feel relieved to have some insurance policies. Say, I have life insurance. That would not be for me. If I die what will happen to that insurance from the Nationwide? It will be for those who are living.

In the first stage, it is essential to recognize that death is very much part of life and that it can happen any time, any day and there is no appointment. A mother cannot save her son or the son his mother.

A few weeks ago, I went to a funeral of a prominent doctor who suddenly fell ill and passed away within a week. The wife, also a doctor, three daughters and one son were crying. However, he was lying dead and breathless. He could not appreciate their worry or tears. He could not treasure them anymore. This is the nature of death. He was very affluent but he had to leave everything and go. In such a way, death is suffering. The Buddha said in the first sermon "*death is a painful experience*" \_ "*maranam pi dukkham*". It is painful to a Buddhist as well as a non-Buddhist, to a doctor and a patient, to a monk and a lay person, to an old person as well as an infant. The ruler fears it as much as a homeless person does. It is a universal experience.

We live in fear of death only when we live in the future. When observing present pain, we do not observe the one that has not arisen, in other words, the pain in the future. Nor do we focus on the pain that is gone. We focus on the present one. If you want to learn how to live in the present, we have to focus on the present object. Train your mind with the object arising at the present. Fear of death exists at the present. We

are going to observe that. The first thing, as I have just explained, is to reflect that death is very much a part of our life and nobody can escape from that. It can happen anywhere, anytime, to any body and in any form. Vipassana meditation trains one to live at the present moment and is, therefore, the path to the deathless here and now.

## **STAGE TWO**

At the second stage, you are going to apply that reflection to specific people. When we do meditation on loving-kindness, we start with ourselves. But now we are not going to start with ourselves. If we do that, we may become more frightened. Death is a frightening phenomenon.

At this stage, we are going to apply reflection on death to a neutral person. Recollect people who are neutral to you, the people towards whom you have not formed like or dislike, say, people in the street or in the station. Look at the crowd and look for someone who is not going to die, someone who can escape from this process. Is there any such?

I think all of you know Sir James Goldsmith, the billionaire, from the Conservative Party in Britain. He could write a draft worth millions or even a billion. When he died only his wife was with him and only a few people attended his funeral. His eldest daughter who was in Mexico was not even informed. She did not know. From that point onward, Sir James Goldsmith's signature was worth nothing. The bank would no longer accept his signature. The billions that he accumulated are nothing to him now. This is the reality of life. How fearful life is and how painful death is. For the neutral

person you can also imagine someone like that. You can imagine a crowd as well as an individual.

At any stage of this type of meditation, should you feel sad or frightened, please bring in mindfulness as practised in the Vipassana meditation. When we become frightened, what we do in Vipassana meditation is to look into our minds and note *frightening, frightening, and frightening*. When we become upset, we note upset; we feel fear we recognize *fear, fear, and fear*. Fear is a meditation object. Fright is a meditation object. It can bring an immediate psychological relief.

### **STAGE THREE**

At the third stage, you are going to focus on someone near and dear to you who has passed away. In my case, it can be my father, my great aunt, my eldest brother and my niece. If you know someone only in death but not in life, you may not choose him or her because it may not help you to see death in the right context. All my grandparents died before I was born. As I have never seen or even heard of how they lived their life, I cannot meditate on them. You are going to choose someone whom you have seen both in life and in death. As we discussed earlier, death has to be reflected in the context of life. You focus by recollecting a few points on how they lived their lives and how they died. Their bodies lie lifeless and breathless. So, the third reflection is on the people who are close to you but have passed away.

## **STAGE FOUR**

The fourth stage may be a bit hard for you. It could be the hardest. It is to apply the reality to yourself. You are not going to include someone you love or someone you do not like. If you include someone you love, you will be very upset. If it is someone you do not like, you will be very happy \_ the kind of happiness that can be full of revenge and ill will. You may be able to include them at a later stage but not now. In the fourth stage, you reflect on yourself, on how you lead your life and one-day you will go lying breathless, lying in a coffin.

I should make one thing special here by offering myself to be included in your meditation object. You are also going to reflect and apply that reality to me, the person giving you the meditation instructions. It is important to do that. I have seen in many countries. People become so attached to their teacher that they become blind and they do not look for other teachers any more. If people go to Burma, say, to the Mogok Vipassana Meditation Centre, some of them learn automatically how to criticize the others such as the Sunlun, Mahasi, etc. This happens in many other centres. To me, the Venerable Sunlun Sayadaw is a remarkable teacher. The Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw is distinguished. The Venerable Mogok Sayadaw is great. Sayagyi U Ba Khin is excellent. The Venerable Ledi Sayadaw and Anagam Saya Thet Gyi are also extraordinary. The Venerable Mingun Cetawun Sayadaw and Ka-thit-wai Sayadaw are marvellous. The Venerable Ajahn Mun and Ajahn Chah are excellent. All of them are great. They are great people. But we should not misuse their greatness to create blind faith by impairing our investigative sense and by starting to criticize others, which these great teachers themselves did



not do. Attachment or even devotion to a teacher can make you blind.

I have been talking to you like this and we have been together for a few days. One day I will go. I will have to. That is the reality of life. So you focus and apply the reality of death to yourself and then me, the person giving you the instructions.

I will repeat the instructions again. The *first* is to reflect that death is a part of life. There is no escape from it and no one escapes from it. There is no appointment. It can happen at any time. Like a clay pot that can be broken at any time, we are vulnerable at any moment. We are like a fruit, which can fall to the ground at any time. The sun that has risen has only one way to go \_ to go down in the west. In the same way, life leads to nothing but death. That is the reality. The *second* instruction is to apply this to a neutral person(s) \_ a crowd or an individual, who is neutral to you, someone you neither like nor dislike. Try to meditate on both their life and their death. *Thirdly*, you will reflect upon the life and death of those who have been close to you but have now departed. *Fourthly* and lastly, you will be reflecting upon yourself and on me.

### **PALI CANONICAL TEXTS** (excerpt)

There are discourses from the Pali Canonical texts dealing on the subject of reflection on death. The following is a translation of one of them. I have done a new translation here, using many available translations in English, Thai and Burmese. For the Thai, I use Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya

edition; for the Burmese, the Chatthasangayana and Sitagu edition. For the English translation, I refer to (1) *The Rhinoceros Horn and Other Early Buddhist Poems* translated by Professor K. R. Norman, Mss. I.B. Horner, both of Cambridge University, and Ven. Professor Walpola Rahula, published by the Pali Text Society, Oxford: 1996. (2) *The Suttanipata* translated by Ven. Professor H. Saddhatissa, and published by Curzon, London: 1994. (Reprint) and (3) *The Salla Sutta: The Arrow* by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Access to Insight: 2009. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org>

### ***The Salla Sutta***

1. The life of mortals in this world is without sign even for the imminent death and uncertain. It is difficult, brief and tied up with misery.
2. There is no way by which those who are born will not die. From old age, or some other cause, there is death. Because this is the nature with living beings.
3. For ripe fruits just as there is constantly danger of falling, so for mortals, once born, there is constant fear of death.
4. As a potter's clay vessels end up broken, so too the life of beings ends up with death.
5. Young & old, stupid & wise, all come under the sway of death; all have death as their end.

6. When overcome by death, going to the other world, the father cannot save his son, nor relatives a relative.
7. Look! Even while relatives are looking on, wailing heavily, people are led away one by one like a cow to the slaughter.
8. In this way is the world afflicted with aging & death, and so the wise do not grieve, knowing the world as it is.
9. One knows not his path, coming or going; seeing neither end, one grieves in vain.
10. By grieving, one gains nothing; confused, harming himself, if a wise man grieves, he hurts himself, too.
11. Not by weeping & grief, does one attain peace of mind. Pain arises all the more. His body is harmed.
12. He grows thin and pale, harming himself by himself. In that way, he cannot bring the dead back to life. Grief is therefore pointless.
13. Not abandoning grief, a person goes all the more to pain. Bewailing the dead, one falls under the influence of grief.
14. Look at others going on their way, people going in accordance with their karmic actions. When coming under the sway of death, living beings simply tremble here.
15. However people may imagine it, life always turns out other than that. Such is the difference. See the way of the world.

16. Even if a person lives a century — or more — he is eventually parted from his community of relatives; he leaves his life behind in this world.

17. So, having heard the arahant, having dispelled lamentation, seeing that someone has died, one should reflect, "he is no longer alive with me."

18. Just as one would put out a burning shelter with water, so does the wise one —discerning, skilful, & wise — blow away any grief arisen, as the wind a bit of cotton fluff.

19. Seeking his own happiness, one should pull out one's own dart (barb/arrow) of grief, longing, & sorrow.

20. With dart pulled out, no clinging, one attains peace of mind; having arisen above and being free from all grief, he has extinguished defilements.