

Embrace death

In order to deal with the suffering when the moment of death arrives, always be prepared, writes PHRA PAISAN VISALO

Life and death are actually one and the same matter. We will die in more or less the same fashion as how we live. If we live in ignorance, our final moment will likely be spent in agony, without any sense of peace and mindfulness. But if we constantly cultivate merits and self-awareness, we should be able to pass away peacefully, being in the state of mindfulness until our last breath.

Life of the awakened one is to be aware of the prevalence of death all the time. There is this ever readiness to confront death. And even when the mind does not yet feel ready, it can be further trained every day as the person performs his or her duty to the best, having accepted that uncertainty is but a fact of life.

There are several methods to cultivate this contemplation on death, or moranassati. Just a thought that we will all die sooner or later so we should maximise the remaining time we have is one example. However, for most people, such recollections may not be enough. They may be keen for a while, but eventually, their lives will fall back into the same patterns of habits, being again indulged in the work or entertainment at hand, while forgetting what is the most important thing to do in their lives.

One simple way to contemplate on death is to imagine what might happen to us if a death really took place - now. What would we lose? Whom would we miss? There might arise a feeling of pain for those who think they are not yet ready. But such an unpleasant situation might help him or her to be better prepared, to practise for the remaining time we still have, in order to deal with the suffering when the moment of loss actually comes.

Here are some more ideas about how to contemplate on death and dying:

Practice dying at bedtime

At the end of the day, the time to rest the mind and the body, is a good opportunity to reflect on the inevitability of death. Practice the process of dying as if we were facing it at this very moment.

The suitable posture is to lie down and relax every part of the body from the head to the toes and especially the face. Breathe in and out freely. Feel the tip of your nose and the softness of the in- and out-breaths. Put down every thought, be it about the past or the future.

As the mind calms down, think of how we are approaching death. We just don't know when. Tonight might be the last night for us. Tomorrow might never come.

Think of how every breath will dissolve as death arrives. The heart will stop beating. The body will no longer be able to move, and it will turn cold and stiff, not unlike a useless log.

Then think of how every valuable material we have acquired and kept will no longer be ours. They will belong to someone else. We

cannot do anything with them. What we used to hold dear will be left unattended.

Moreover, we will no longer have another chance to talk with our children or our beloved. Everything we used to do with them will become the past. We will no longer be able to visit our parents or do anything more for them. There is not even time to say good-bye, or to make amends with those we have had grudges with.

All the work has to be left behind too, even those that have not been finished. We can no longer make any further revision. However important that work is, it will have to be abandoned. The same with all the knowledge and experiences we have accumulated - they will all disappear with us.

All the fame, power and supporters will leave our hands. No matter how powerful we are, we cannot take any of these things with us. Do not expect that people will continue to praise us after we die. Even our name will be finally forgotten.

As we reflect on this, observe our feelings. Do we worry, regret, or have an attachment to any of these? Are we ready to accept these losses? If not, what makes us still agitated? Such contemplation will help us realise that there are a few things that we should do but have not yet done (or done enough), as well as things that we still feel a strong attachment to. Such awareness will prompt us to do the important but often overlooked matters, as well as practicing the art of letting go.

Contemplation on death on various occasions

In fact, one can contemplate on death any time during the day. When travelling, by car or boat or plane, always be prepared. If

there is something untoward happening in the next few seconds, how should we confront it? What would we think of first? Are we ready to give up everything we feel attached to at that point in time?

When leaving the house, think if this could be our last trip and we may not be able to return to see our parents, beloved, or children again. Is there anything left that we may have regretted for not finishing them first? Are there any conflicts that we may wish we should have reconciled? Such awareness will urge us to try to treat our family better and not let certain issues to be resolved in the future - for such a day may never come.

Reading newspapers, especially reports about accidents or disasters, is another opportune moment to contemplate on the uncertainty of life. Anything could happen without warning; people can die at any place and time. Try to think of how the same thing might happen to us, too. Will we be able to confront it? Are we prepared to die?

Attending a funeral service should also be the time to remind ourselves of the imminence of death. Once the deceased also walked and moved about like us. In the future, we would all have to lie down like him or her, not being able to take anything with us except the effects of our good or bad deeds.

The best dharma teacher is the body in the coffin in front of us. He or she is trying to wake us up from indulgence and heedlessness in life. Whoever believes they still have a few more years to go will have to think again as they attend the funeral of a child or a teenager. Those engrossed in their power should realise that however "big" they may have been, everyone will end up being smaller than the coffin that would contain their body.

Similarly, when visiting the sick person, we should remember that our body will one day be in similar condition. Again, the patient, especially the terminally ill, is like our dharma teacher. Whatever their reactions - anxious, traumatic, desperate - they are teaching us how to prepare ourselves, so that when our turn comes, we may not suffer as much as they do. The sick person who seems to be in peace and able to maintain his or her composure despite the apparent physical pain, is also showing us examples on how we should likewise prepare ourselves, especially while we are still in good health.

To keep our mind still in time of sickness is the same matter as to keep our mind still when facing death. So think of the period when we fall sick as an exercise to prepare ourselves for death. Sickness is like the first few lessons before we move on to the most difficult level - if we cannot deal with sickness, how then can we confront death?

Reminders on death

We could apply anything we come across in our daily life to remind us about death. It depends on one's circumstances and creativity.

Some Tibetan meditation masters would pour all the water from their personal glasses and put them with the bottom up next to their beds. They do this because they were not certain if they would be able to wake up and use the glass again on the following day. The ritual thus served like a reminder for the masters that death could come to them at any given time.

Later, a Thai writer has learned about this story and applied it to herself: Every night before she goes to bed, she always makes sure that every dish has been washed thoroughly. So if she happened to die in her sleep, there would be no dirty dishes left as burdens for others, she said.

A 55-year-old man used marbles as his "death reminders". Each marble is equivalent to about a week of living. The man has calculated that if he were to reach the average life span, taken to be about 75 years old, he would have about 1,000 weeks left. So he bought 1,000 marbles and put them in a plastic box. Every week he would take out one marble from the box. The diminishing amount of the marbles reminds him that his days are numbered. It reminds him of the approaching death, which enables him to choose to do the most important thing, and not let himself drift away worrying over the inconsequential.

Each person can choose different "reminders" _ from the sunrise and sunset, or the flower that comes out in a bud, blooms and finally withers away, or a leaf that springs from a tree branch and finally falls down to the ground. They remind us of the transience of life. Lord Buddha once suggested one should view life not unlike the foamy top of the waves, or as a dew drop, a lightning flash _ they are all transitory, and thus is our own existence.

Other activities to prepare for death

We could try an exercise of "letting go" of our beloved people and belongings. Choose seven objects _ they could be a person, a pet animal, or something we consider dear to us _ and ask yourself if we were forced to give up one thing, what would that thing would be. Continue with each of the remaining six objects. We could imagine ourselves being in an unpleasant situation _ like facing a

fire, an earthquake or an accident _ that prompts us to lose each of our cherished items. What would we choose to keep? And what to give up?

Such an exercise will teach us how to let go. It will help us review our own sets of attachments, to discover what we consider to be the most important in our lives. Some may find they love or worry about dogs more than their brothers and sisters. Others may be willing to give up everything but not their favourite doll. Still others would choose their computer as the last item to give up. We may uncover something in ourselves that we have not been aware of before _ and then we could try to adapt to the changing circumstances. All this is crucial in the preparation for death since ultimately we will have to lose everything one way or the other. Actually, even when we are still alive, we are bound to lose certain things or people, and often without the ability to make a choice of what we would like to keep and what we would like to lose.

Contemplation on death and dying

Here is an example of a prayer you can recite every night, as a way to remind yourself of the transience of life:

"As you breathe in and breathe out, try to keep your mind in the calm and peaceful state.

Imagine a picture of a beautiful flower. Then visualise how the same flower starts to wilt, losing each petal, one by one. How the once dazzling colours slowly fade away until the whole flower becomes eventually lifeless.

Imagine a scenery of a beautiful landscape at dawn. How the whole sky is basked in the first soft light of the day. Then think of the same place at noontide when the sun is at its fiercest. Time gradually tickles away until it is now dusk, and finally everything is dissolved into the darkness.

Absorb all these pictures into ourselves. Our existence is like the flower that will one day wither away. And like the sun that has to leave the sky every day, we will all have to leave this Earth sooner or later.

We will all have to leave this Earth. Nobody knows when that time will come. Maybe next year. Maybe next month. Or maybe tomorrow.

Let's imagine that today is the last day we will live on this Earth. There will no longer be tomorrows for us. By the time tomorrow comes, our body will be lying still, no longer able to feel anything, even our own breaths.

Let's imagine that in the next few hours, every person we have met, talked, and laughed with, those who have always been part of our lives, we will no longer be able to see them again. There is no exception whatsoever.

Imagine the picture of our parents, children, brothers and sisters whom we have met everyday. We will have to leave them all in the next few hours. Imagine the face of our beloved. The time to leave him or her is soon to arrive. Imagine how soon we will have to leave all the friends behind. We will no longer be able to see them again.

Think of what has happened this morning. Whom did we see? What did we do? Think of the time we spent during breakfast this morning.

Think of the time we went to see our children off at school. Think of the friends we have met in the meeting room.

Think of all the valuables we have toiled our labour to acquire them. The house, cars, jewellery, money, all the things we used to hold as dear. We will soon have to give up everything we once owned.

Think of all the work we have loved and devoted ourselves through all these years. Whatever it is, we will no longer have the opportunity to do it now. All the work that is still left undone, there will be no time to finish it now.

Soon the world we have known all our lives will disappear. There will be nothing left. Nothing at all. The important thing is that our whole lives will come to an end in the next few hours.

Now come back to explore our feelings at the moment. How do we feel right now? Are we scared? Contemplate on this fear. Feel it. Acknowledge it. What exactly are we fearful of? Where is this fear located actually? Take in this feeling called fear. Observe our own reactions thoroughly.

Are we worried about anything? What do we think is the hardest to leave behind? Our father and mother? Our beloved? Our children? Friends? Wealth? Work?

Keep our heart still. Contemplate if everything we think belong to us - are they ours really? Can we take them with us? Or are they just placed under our care, but only for a while. Now it is time for

us to leave them so that others can take care of and to make use of them instead.

For all the work we have done, now it is time to give it up. It is time for others to carry it on. We have left enough legacies on this Earth. They are now part of this Earth, and not ours. They are no longer what we should worry about anymore.

Our parents, children, brothers and sisters, and everyone whom we have loved, we have had the fortune to live with them for a while. We have done what should be done. Now it is time for us to take leave. Do not worry that they will not be able to live without us. We used to leave them on their own before. The only difference is that this time around we will have to leave them longer than before.

We will soon have to leave this body. This body is not ours. We have borrowed it from nature.

We have been given this body for free through our parents. It is now time to return it to nature. It is now time for this body to return to all the four elements in nature - the Earth, the water, the wind and the fire.

It is now time for us to shed away every feeling of guilt, anxiety, remorse. Do not let these feelings burden our heart. It is not too late to ask for forgiveness. Now let's ask for everyone we have once hurt or harmed to forgive us. Let everyone of us be free from animosity toward one another.

If we still hold grudges or revengeful feelings toward some people, give them up. Do not let the ill feelings eat us from the inside. Forgive them. Forgive everyone who has caused us to suffer. Free

our heart from all the hatred and anger. Let everyone of us live in peace.

Finally, abandon everything we used to hold as ours. Give up everything, including ourselves. Actually, there is nothing that can be thought of as ours, even this thing we called "mine". They are not really ours. Give up every attachment to the notion of self. Do not anticipate about what will happen to us, in what form we will be reborn. Just remember that whatever that is will be [another cause of] suffering. There is nothing to grasp, to hold onto. Give up everything, be it the past or the future. Keep your mind in the state of peace, emptiness, the bliss of complete freedom."