

Mindfulness of Death

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Do not pursue the past. Do not lose yourself in the future. The past is history. The future yet to come. Looking deeply at life as it is in the very here and now, the practitioner dwells unshaken and free in heart. We must be diligent today, as death may strike tomorrow, for there is no bargaining with the lord of death.
—The Buddha, 2,500 BCE

The principal Buddhist suttas on mindfulness include the *ānāpānasati sutta*, *satipatthāna sutta*, *mahasiptthāna sutta*, and *kāyagatāsati sutta*. Irrespective of whether they prefer to practise mindfulness from a Buddhist or secular perspective, most dedicated mindfulness practitioners are familiar with many of the core teachings outlined in these suttas (e.g., use of the breath as a mindfulness anchor, mindfulness of the body and its constituents, maintaining mindful awareness during daily activities, etc.). However, one key aspect of the abovementioned suttas that often seems to be overlooked by mindfulness practitioners is the emphasis these teachings place on cultivating mindfulness of death and impermanence. Indeed, the *satipatthāna sutta*, *mahasiptthāna sutta*, and *kāyagatāsati sutta* each contains the ‘nine charnel ground contemplations’, and the 13th exercise of the *ānāpānasati sutta* is specifically concerned with cultivating an awareness of impermanence.

There are several important reasons why these (and many other) Buddhist teachings advocate the practice of mindfulness of death. One of these reasons is to help people overcome the tendency to be complacent about death and to assume that

it is something that will never happen to them. The problem with being complacent about death is that if we have not taken the time to cultivate a deep understanding of death and its inevitability, the likelihood is that we will leave this world full of fear, anguish, and regret. Furthermore, since we encounter impermanence and death during every single moment of our lives, effective mindfulness practice requires that we encompass these ‘truths’ into our field of awareness. In this article, we draw upon both Buddhist and Western psychological perspectives in order to outline some insights about death and then go on to discuss how practising mindfulness of death can be a very rewarding and liberating experience.

Life: A Near-Death Experience

According to the US Central Intelligence Agency, the world mortality rate for 2013 is 7.9 deaths per 1,000 people per year (i.e., 0.79 %). Based on these figures, an average of 107 people die each minute—almost two people every second. This means that if you are somebody that normally goes to bed at 11 p.m. and sleeps for 8 hours, by the time you wake up at 7 a.m. the next morning, over 50,000 people have died. Death is a very common occurrence. The most prevalent cause of death is illness (especially illness in old age). Other reasonably common causes of death include accident, suicide, and homicide. More unusual causes of death are occurrences such as spontaneous human combustion and death by lightning strike (although these could arguably be classed as accidental).

In the 1960s and 1970s, psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and psychologist and medic Raymond Moody played a pivotal role in bringing the phenomenon of near-death experience (NDE) to the attention of both the general public and the wider scientific community. The NDE is typically associated with a

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particular set or pattern of experiences that can occur when a person is close to dying (e.g., due to illness), when they believe they are close to dying (i.e., life-threatening situations), or when they find themselves in the period between clinical death and resuscitation. NDEs are not particularly common occurrences and invariably involve what some people might describe as ‘mystical’ experiences (e.g., an out-of-body experience, the experience of moving through a tunnel, communicating with a being of light, meeting with deceased persons, life review, etc.). However, by slightly broadening the defining criteria, we would argue that every single sentient being is currently partaking in a near-death experience.

From the moment we are born, every single second that passes by brings us closer to our death. Even being young provides no assurance of life as death can occur at any age. Indeed, some people die while still in the womb, some in infancy, and some in adolescence. Some people die in the prime of adulthood, and some in old age. Life is like the sand moving through an hour-glass—some people start with more sand than others—but sooner or later, it runs out just the same. The Buddhist teachings explain the inevitability of death using the analogy of a prisoner being led to their execution—every step they take draws them closer to death.

The human body is a beautiful and wondrous entity—but invincibility is not one of its strengths. A small pin prick, contact with a hot pan, and a finger trapped in a door—these are just a few examples of how the smallest mishap can cause tremendous discomfort and pain. In fact, there only has to be the slightest imbalance in the external environment, and the human body starts to rapidly shut down. Environmental conditions such as being too hot, being too cold, a shortage of water, or a lack of food can all quickly lead to death. Even such minor things as eating a mouthful of spoiled food, catching a common flu bug, or slipping on ice can lead to death. In fact, at any one time, the only thing that separates us from death is a single breath in or out. It seems that the human being operates a ‘just-in-time’ survival system which means that the slightest delay in taking in air, water, food, or medicine can be fatal.

We are born, we live, and we will die. There exist no scientifically verifiable instances of any sentient being—human or otherwise—being able to defeat death. The human body is impermanent, friends and family are impermanent, the planet we live on is impermanent, and even the universe will ultimately cease to be. All phenomena are transient occurrences and are subject to decay and dissolution. Absolutely nothing escapes the cycle of impermanence. This is what the Buddha said about the fleeting nature of life:

This existence of ours is as transient as autumn leaves. To watch the birth and death of beings is like looking at the movements of a dance. A lifetime is like a flash of lightning in the sky, rushing by, like a torrent down a steep mountain.

The Life Gamble

In terms of cultivating mindfulness of death and of earnestly applying themselves to spiritual practice, it seems that some people are reluctant to do so because although they claim to have understood the impermanent nature of life, they believe that death represents the end of their existence. This relates to a dilemma that we call ‘the life gamble’—the simple choice of whether or not to engage in spiritual practice. This is a ‘primordial choice’ that transcends religion, ethnicity, wealth, sex, and culture. In fact, since this is a choice that affects everybody equally, we can all be referred to as ‘life gamblers’. On the one hand, the life gambler can choose to adopt a self-centred outlook and bet ‘all-in’ on the belief of no afterlife and no karmic consequence to actions in this life or beyond. After all, if this life is all there is, then why should we waste our time thinking about anything except mindlessly indulging ourselves? On the other hand, the life gambler can choose to ‘hedge their bets’ and integrate spiritual awareness into their life in order to cultivate unconditional well-being during this life and to prepare themselves for death.

According to the Buddhist perspective, the first scenario reflects a ‘high-risk low-reward’ strategy because if the life gambler is wrong and ‘mind-essence’ continues beyond this lifetime, then there is a strong probability of anguish, regret, and disorientation during the death-phase transition. The second scenario therefore reflects a ‘low-risk high-reward’ strategy because if it transpires that there is no ‘existence’ after death, then there will be no stream of consciousness to experience regret due to having needlessly engaged in spiritual practice. However, if it transpires that the thread of subtle consciousness does indeed endure throughout successive lifetimes, then the life gambler not only reaps the benefit of spiritual practice during this life but is also better prepared for experiencing the various (and otherwise petrifying) death visions, sounds, and faints with greater confidence and awareness. Likewise, and depending upon whether one subscribes to the belief in reincarnation, the person who hedges their bets is also better positioned to further their spiritual progress during subsequent lifetimes (i.e., until the attainment of liberation).

The saying ‘gambling with their life’ is sometimes used to refer to people who engage in life-threatening or potentially harmful activities. However, from the Buddhist perspective, the person who chooses not to earnestly engage in spiritual practice might be said to be ‘gambling with their lifetime’. Please take some time to think about which ‘life-gamble strategy’ you are currently employing. If you are somebody that considers yourself to be a ‘spiritual practitioner’ (i.e., somebody taking a low-risk high-reward approach), then from time to time, just stop and ask yourself whether your practice is on track or whether you are allowing your ego to fool or deceive you. Is your spiritual/mindfulness practice about

improving your public or professional image? Is it a means of zoning out in order to temporarily escape from your problems? Are you getting drawn into mundane affairs and forgetting about what is really important in life? Is your practice tangibly helping you to enter death with total fearlessness? Try to be really honest with yourself when you answer these questions.

Practising Mindfulness of Death

In our experience, any complacency regarding death quickly disappears when people find themselves at death's door. At this time, it is not uncommon for people to experience overpowering feelings of regret, anger, and fear. Indeed, at death, people often manifest a fierce clinging and attachment towards their family, friends, possessions, reputation, and life achievements. However, when the last few grains of sand are about to slip through the hour glass, these things count for absolutely nothing and cannot be carried forward. We have to leave life in exactly the same manner that we entered it—all alone.

You might think that it is inappropriate to discuss the reality of death in as direct and open a manner as we are here. However, we believe that the sooner a person starts to fully accept that at some indefinite point they will definitely die, the sooner they can begin to prepare themselves for death rather than waiting until it is too late. By practising mindfulness of death, what we are essentially doing is being completely honest and open with ourselves and with the nature of reality more generally. As soon as we stop trying to hide from death or pretend that we are immune to it, we find that it becomes much easier to breathe, and we immediately feel more confident, relaxed, and truthful with ourselves.

One way to practise mindfulness of death is to develop, with every single breath and heartbeat, a deep awareness of the uncertainty of the time of death as well as its inevitability. This awareness can be worked towards by concluding each meditation session with a few minutes specifically contemplating the impermanent nature of ourselves and of phenomena more generally. Alternatively, you may wish to receive guidance from an accomplished mindfulness/meditation teacher about practising the aforementioned *nine charnel ground contemplations*. This meditation involves sitting in equanimity and mindfully visualizing a (or your) corpse as it progresses through the process of decay and dissolution following death. You will know when your mindfulness of death practice is hitting the mark because due to intuiting that all things ultimately cease to be, formerly stressful situations will no longer phase you. Phenomena are ubiquitous in their transience; they have no more substance than a rabbit's horn

(which exists only in a dream or a magician's illusion), so let experience unfold without clinging to it. Thoroughly enjoy the practice of sitting in stillness and observing the birth and death of phenomena.

Mindfulness of death helps us to prioritise what is important in life. If you are stressed because of your job, finances, health, or relationships, perhaps you should ask yourself whether there is really any value in being worked up about these things. In 100 years from now, it is guaranteed that both you and the person or situation causing you worry will no longer exist. In fact, can you be certain that you will remain alive and/or healthy for even one more day? We are definitely not saying that you should become paranoid or obsessed about death. However, since death is a journey that we all have to make, we owe it to ourselves to start making preparations for that journey from today.

The beautiful thing is that by allowing the realization of impermanence to infuse our being, we can gradually learn not to hold on to things too tightly. This means that when the people and things that we love are present, we can truly cherish them, but when they dissolve, we can let go of them more freely. Indeed, the psychology literature indicates that an increased acceptance and internalization of impermanence can actually buffer against psychopathology and assist with post-traumatic growth. This is consistent with the findings from our own empirical research (using an 8-week intervention called Meditation Awareness Training) where the practice of mindfulness of impermanence has been shown to be a joyful and spiritually enriching experience.

A useful thing to remember is that every time we do something, we do it for the first and last time. A moment of time never repeats itself. The present moment vanishes at exactly the same instant it manifests. The recognition of this can help invest the things we do and say with great meaning. Being mindful of death means that we no longer have to sleepwalk through life—we no longer have to be walking corpses. We would like to finish this article with one of our own reflections on death called 'A Bubble in the Wind':

A Bubble in the Wind

Life is like a bubble carried by the wind. Some bubbles burst sooner, others burst later. Some burst of their own accord, others burst by accident. Some are deliberately burst. However, one way or another, all bubbles burst. The difference between the realized spiritual practitioner and the everyday person, is that the practitioner recognizes they are not only the bubble, but are also the wind that gently carries it along. That wind has no point of origin and is without destination. It blows freely wherever it likes. How wonderful!