

## *Mindfulness of Death & the Deathless*

*December 19, 2020*

The Buddha recommended practicing mindfulness of death because, as he said, it leads to the deathless. How does it do that? There are basically two things you have to keep in mind. That's what the mindfulness part is. One is the fact that death could happen at any time. That's to give rise to a sense of urgency, realizing there's work to be done.

The work, of course depends on the other thing you have to keep in mind, which is the Buddha's explanation of what happens at death. The mind latches onto a craving. It can't stay with the body anymore, and it starts sending out cravings in all directions.

There's one passage where the Buddha calculates that there are 108 different kinds of craving—and that just happens to do with the time-frame for the craving. The specifics can make many, many more forms.

But he says you cling to your craving in the same way that a fire in one house, as it moves to another house, clings to the wind. We would say that the wind blows it, but their explanation was that the fire needed some sort of support, some sort of sustenance, and the wind is what provided the sustenance. The fire clung to the wind. That's how it got to the next house.

So that's how a being leaves this body and goes to another body. It's clinging to craving in between. So that tells you the kind of work that has to be done: training your clingings, being very clear about where your desires are going, and having some control over them—having the alertness, mindfulness, and ardency to want to send your desires in the right direction. If you haven't completed your training in this lifetime, you want to be able to find a place where you can continue training in the next.

So that's what you're preparing for. This, of course, is one of the reasons why we practice concentration, because it's a very good way of seeing how the mind sends out its feelers. It creates a thought-world and then it goes into that thought-world. That's the process of what the Buddha calls "becoming," followed by "birth."

So the process that would lead to rebirth is happening right here, all the time. All the “becomings” that we create in the course of the day are simply small versions of what’s going to happen when we can’t stay in this body any longer. Different worlds will appear to the mind, and you’ll choose one to go into.

The worlds, of course—the options that are available—will be based on your past karma, but also on your clingings and cravings. So if you’ve got craving for sensuality, it might take you to a sensual place, where it *looks* like it’s going to be pleasurable. But look at the human realm. It’s one of the better sensual levels, yet look at all the suffering all around us.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha says if someone is on their deathbed, you try to get them to let go of human sensuality, to see the drawbacks of human sensuality, and at the very least focus on deva sensuality—something better.

Of course, even *that* has its drawbacks. Ideally, get them so they can see that *any* kind of construction of a sense of self will take them to a world where there’s going to be some suffering. And if they can let go of that construction, that process of wanting to create a self around any kind of clinging, then there’s the opportunity for release. That’s the ideal.

So that’s the work to be done. But then again, mindfulness of death reminds us not only of the work to be done, but also the urgency of doing it *now*. Because it’s so easy to put things off. You say, “I’m a little bit too tired tonight”, or “I’d like a little bit of pleasure before I settle down in the meditation, thinking about something I like.” But suppose the Big One came, the big earthquake they keep warning us about, and the sala collapsed. And your last thought was what you’d like to have for a meal tomorrow—which would be totally useless, and actually might lead you to a very unskillful rebirth.

So you want to focus *right now* on the work that needs to be done. One, peel your mind away from its fascination with human sensuality. Two, peel your mind away from its fascination with creating a sense of self, its habit for creating states of becoming, and then going into them.

If, when you’re sitting here meditating, a potential distraction comes up, remind yourself: You’re practicing for the sake of dying well, so you don’t want to let the mind slip off into the distraction, no matter how innocent or innocuous it

may seem. You want to stay continually with the breath. Any feelers that would go out from this, you just want to cut them off.

Make the breath comfortable so that it's a good place to stay. But keep reminding yourself: You're here in the present moment, not because the present moment is a wonderful place or because it's the only place to be—what they call the “eternal present.” You're here because there's work to be done here.

That's always the Buddha's focus: Every time he talks about the importance of focusing on the present moment, it's always in the context of mindfulness of death and the work that needs to be done. As he says, do your duty right now, right now. You're not hankering after the future, you're not dwelling on the past. You're focusing on what's appearing right now, and then doing your duty with regard to it—which is training the mind so it can let go of its cravings, and not to slide so easily into its states of becoming.

So you provide the mind with a spot here with the concentration. You've made a good foundation right here. And from here you get to see the movements of the mind really clearly. That way, you can figure out what to do with them.

The problem is, of course, you may *not* die with the next breath. You may live on to be eighty years old, ninety years old. So we do have to plan our lives. The Buddha never says just to abandon all thoughts of the future, and just focus on right now. You do have to plan.

But learn how to wear your plans lightly, so that you keep your priorities straight. Your priorities are: training of mind. So even while you're here at the monastery and there's a lot of work to be done, still you should learn how to create a space inside your mind where you can do the work of the mind *and* the work outside as well.

So that if, in the middle of a task, you suddenly realize you can't stay in your body any longer, you can drop the work outside, focus on the work inside, and prepare yourself to go. To go *well*. That's the whole purpose of this.

Because the way the Buddha teaches mindfulness of death, it makes sense only in the context of his explanation of what happens at death. If it were the case that death were the end of everything, mindfulness of death would mean doing everything you can to survive physically and squeezing as much enjoyment as you could out of whatever time is available. The attitude of “eat, drink and be merry,

for tomorrow we may die”: That’s how some people think about death.

But as the Buddha pointed out, a basic principle of mundane right view is that here is the next world, and it’s built by your karma, built by your actions. And as he explained further in transcendent right view, your state of mind is going to be very, very, important at the moment of death. You want to be able to see your clings, see your cravings. If you can learn how not to ride with them at all, so much the better.

But if you find that you can’t manage that, at least keep yourself, as the texts say, “rightly directed.” Have a sense of what *would* be a good rebirth, one where you can practice. But always keep in the back of the mind that even places that are good to practice have a lot of dangers.

So be really strict with your mind as it creates new versions of you in its new becomings all the time. Learn how to pare them down so that you can understand the process. Understand it for the sake of aborting it.

Only then can you be really free. Otherwise, you’re stuck living in time. And time just slips away, slips away. All the things you think of accomplishing, they just go right through your fingers.

So you want to find something that’s really solid, of essence. And the essence, of course, is release. Everything you can do that leads there takes its value from the fact that it’s related to release. The word for “essence” in Pali, *sara*, also means “heartwood,” the hard wood at the core of the tree. And all our practices, although they may not be the heartwood, at least they’re not just twigs and branches. They’re the softwood that surrounds the core, protects it.

So you try to keep your actions within that range—aiming for release—so that as the body passes away, or as your memory goes as you get older, you’ll still have something of solid worth—something that even death can’t have any impact on.

*That’s* how mindfulness of death leads to the deathless.