

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 03-29-2016.

Last week I posted a video to the Silent Mind Open Heart FaceBook page. For those of you who haven't seen it, it was of Bhante Gunaratana speaking about his recent experience with a very severe case of double pneumonia that occurred while he was in Asia. Bhante commented that his physician told him it was unusual for someone his age to survive such an illness. Bhante also commented that he was surprised at how painful it was to breath, but that as he was going through it, he wasn't worried about dying. He noted that he frequently does the practice of contemplating death.

Within the past month a professional colleague who was near my age simply dropped dead while engaged in an athletic activity and several other acquaintances have had significant illnesses. So death has been on my mind a bit more than usual. At times like this the question always comes up for me "How prepared are you for your own death or that of your loved ones?" So I thought I'd talk about what our practice tradition has to say about working with death.

At the end of this talk I want to share the instructions on death contemplation from the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. First, though, I want to mention a few other ways of working with death that I've found helpful.

One practice is contemplating road kill. When encountering road kill when I'm out walking, if I have the time I try to really look at a body that has been damaged and is "dead bloated, livid, and oozing matter". I try to notice if there is repulsion or if I can simply look with mindfulness, seeing it the way that it is. The important thing here is to really pay attention to one's own reactions and to meet those reactions without judgment, with kindness and objectivity. Then letting go of that reactivity so that you can continue looking. After paying close attention both to the body and to any reactions one may have towards it, it is important to reflect that "This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate."

Another practice is reading obituaries, especially those of people who are near your own age. I think I started this practice when I was in my 50's, maybe because at that age I was seeing more people my age showing up in the obits, or maybe a teacher recommended it. I

don't recall. Again, it's a practice of really noticing one's own reactivity and just allowing the reality and truth of impermanence to sink in.

When I worked with Matthew Flickstein, he offered a number of different contemplations on death. One method was carrying a foot-long plastic sword with you all day for a week or a month to remind yourself that death could occur at any moment. While I appreciated the symbolism, the plastic sword wasn't very practical for everyday life. A variation that I've been practicing is whenever there's a departure in my life, my own departing or a friend or loved one departing, I remind myself that I or they might die during this trip. I do this not in an anxious fearful way, but simply as an acknowledgement of the uncertainty of life and the certainty of death.

In his book *Perspectives on Satipaṭṭhāna*, Anālayo Bhikkhu wrote:

As long as the constant change inherent in life is not recognized, death is easily perceived as an abrupt end of all that has thus far been experienced as stable and lasting. Once sustained contemplation has made it clear that life is nothing but change, death becomes part of this process...¹

So, the more we come to see the impermanent and process nature of the world of our experience, the more we come to recognize the conditioned nature of the world of our experience including our own sense of self, then the less threatened we begin to feel about death. We come to see that death is occurring in each moment, and that what will happen in the next moment is always a mystery.

Now to close my talk this evening I'm going to read the part of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* that contains an exercise for working with death. This is an exercise that is often seems to be neglected by contemporary teachers, but I've found the contemplation of death to be immensely valuable as a practice when done in the context of a general practice that focuses on seeing the impermanence of the world of our experience.

I want to emphasize two things about these instructions. They begin with the phrase "as though one were to see a corpse". This isn't requiring that we actually see a corpse, it is speaking of an act of imagination, "as though we imagined seeing a corpse". The second important phrase is "one compares this same body with it", that is with the corpse. So again this is an act of imagination, of thought, of contemplation. Engaging in the acts of

imagination and comparison are the content of this practice, but it is also important to bring kindness as well as mindfulness, that balanced, equanimous state of mind, and curiosity or investigation to these experiences. While you are listening to the sutta, look to see if there is any reactivity as you imagine and compare.

These are the instructions:

Furthermore, a practitioner, just as if they were to see a corpse thrown in the charnel ground—dead for one, two, or three days, bloated, livid, and festering—they'd compare it with their own body: 'This body is also of that same nature, that same kind, and cannot go beyond this.' ...

Furthermore, a practitioner, just as if they were to see a corpse thrown in a charnel ground being eaten by crows, hawks, vultures, herons, dogs, tigers, leopards, jackals, and many kinds of little creatures, they'd compare it with their own body: 'This body is also of that same nature, that same kind, and cannot go beyond this.' ...

Furthermore, a practitioner, just as if they were to see a corpse thrown in a charnel ground, a skeleton with flesh and blood, held together by sinews ...

A skeleton without flesh but smeared with blood and held together by sinews ...

A skeleton without flesh and blood held together by sinews ...

Bones without sinews scattered in every direction—here a hand-bone, there a foot-bone, here a shin-bone, there a thigh-bone, here a hip-bone, there a rib-bone, here a back-bone, there an arm-bone, here a neck-bone, there a jaw-bone, here a tooth, there the skull—they'd compare it with their own body: 'This body is also of that same nature, that same kind, and cannot go beyond this.'

Furthermore, a practitioner, just as if they were to see a corpse thrown in a charnel ground, with white bones, the color of shells ...

Bones more than a year old, heaped in a pile ...

Bones rotted and crumbled to dust, they'd compare it with their own body: 'This body is also of that same nature, that same kind, and cannot go beyond this.'

In this way they meditate by observing an aspect of the body inside; they meditate by observing an aspect of the body outside; they meditate by observing an aspect of the body inside and outside.

They meditate by observing the reasons for the origination of the body; they meditate by observing the reasons for the dissolution of the body; they meditate by observing the reasons for the origination and dissolution of the body.

Or mindfulness is established that 'There is a body', to the extent necessary for knowledge and mindfulness. They meditate independent, not grasping at anything in the world. This too is how a practitioner meditates by observing an aspect of the body."²

Give yourself some time to just let this soak in. If you can, just sit quietly for a while.

Thank you for opening your minds and your hearts to this truth of impermanence.

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Notes

1. Anālayo Bhikkhu, *Perspectives on Satipaṭṭhāna*, Cambridge, UK: Windhorse Publications, 2013, p. 109.

2. MN 10.1.6, adapted from Ajahn Sujato, trans., Sutta Central, <https://suttacentral.net/en/mn10>, downloaded 2016-03-28, 3:25 p.m. CDT.

Note: replaced "monastic" with "practitioner"