

May 20, 2023 Saturday Afternoon, Death and Dying Workshop - Part 2

(Talk has been reviewed by John 5/24/23)

John: I can speak some now and lead a guided meditation later.

In Buddhism and in particular the Theravada tradition there are death awareness practices called *maranasati*.

In the first monastery I lived in in Thailand there was a cremation tower in the middle of a monastery. Every two weeks or so a pickup truck would come into the monastery bearing a coffin. This is how we knew there was going to be cremation.

Sometimes they would bring the casket into the chapel and open it up. There was an opportunity for the monastics and laypeople to sit with the corpse and reflect upon the impermanence of the body and death. Often times, there was nothing cosmetically done to the corpse. If a person had been in a motorcycle accident, and it had been a number of days since that happened, the body could be bloated and blue, distorted in various ways and smelly. After a time the casket was brought to the middle of the monastery, where there was a funeral pyre. There were no sides to the pyre; it was like a tower. The body was put on stacks of wood and it was burned. We could see the body being burned because the pyre wasn't enclosed. I found myself feeling strong aversion to witnessing a body being burned. I would go to the corner of the monastery and do walking meditation while all this was going on, because I really didn't want any part of it. I was young at the time and it didn't feel like death was imminent for me.

I had to look at my fear and aversion to participating more fully in this experience of the cremation of bodies. As the body burned and the smoke filled the monastery, the smell from the smoke would get into my robes, which was a distinct smell. For days afterwards, until I would once again wash my robes, that smell of death would be with me as a reminder. One day I too will die.

While practicing in Varanasi, also known as the City of Shiva who is the Lord of Death, I also had opportunity to reflect on death. It is the wish of many Hindus to die in Varanasi and if it isn't possible to die there then have the body transported to the city for cremation. There are burning ghats along the Ganges River where cremations are taking place day and night and after the cremation some of the ashes are placed in the river. It is a very powerful experience to see families gathered together around the pyre, seeing their loved ones being cremated. As I lived in Thailand and other countries in Asia, this awareness of death became increasingly a part of my practice.

There are a number of practices in the Theravada tradition that can be helpful to us. One of them is called the Five Reflections. This practice can be done after one meditates or at any time.

For example, with a quiet mind reflecting upon these truths, that I am subject to aging. I have not gone beyond aging. This is the first fact that I should reflect upon, I am subject to aging. My body is aging right now.

I am subject to illness. I have not gone beyond illness. Illness is unavoidable. My body will become ill.

I am subject to death. I have not gone beyond death and I will die. I will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me. That upon death, I am going to be separated from those loved ones on earth—my friends, my family, and those things that I loved and cherished in my life. I'm going to grow different and separate from that which was so near and dear to me when I was living.

And then the fifth reflection is, I am the owner of my actions. I am heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have actions as my arbitrator. Whatever I do for good or for evil, to that I will fall heir.

So, this fifth reflection is reflecting upon the law of karma and recognizing that whatever it is that I do or say in this lifetime, that the results of those words, the results of those actions, whether wholesome or unwholesome, skillful or unskillful, that this follows me.

Aaron was speaking to us about the fact that consciousness, body consciousness, and mind consciousness begin to break up. The aggregates of body and mind as we experienced them in being human, through this process of death and moving through the bardo with the dissolution of the aggregates, then what is it that follows us?

Aaron spoke about the fact that awareness is always there. The essence of who we are is always there, whether we are in body or disembodied. Besides awareness what is it that follows us from one lifetime to the next lifetime? What it is that carries over besides awareness is our karma. We are the heirs to our karma. I am the owner of my actions. I am heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions and have my actions as my arbitrator. Whatever I do for good or for evil, to that I will be heir.

These Five Remembrances brings death more to the forefront of our consciousness, rather than something which is hidden. Direct physical contact with the dying and dead is less common than some other cultures, such as in Asia.

Here is a picture here (*holds up a photo*) of a woman who had died in India. Her family probably wasn't wealthy enough to be able to afford the wood to cremate her body. The impression I got was this woman's family or acquaintances dressed her in this clothing and laid her in the street. People passing by put coins near her body so that there would be enough money to be able to afford a cremation. I have this on my altar as a reminder of death, and that myself and all of us are going to die, just as this woman died.

By bringing death more to the forefront of our consciousness, we can make death awareness an aspect of our practice. The foot of an elephant is the greatest footprint of any animal. The Buddha said meditation on death is the greatest meditation. There is a

deepening awareness of impermanence and the changing body and mind. Awareness of death is an insight practice that can help us see the dissolution of the aggregates and know our Buddha nature.

This kind of contemplation or reflection upon death is a very powerful one. I'm hoping later in our meeting today we can do a death awareness meditation.

Thank You!