

# 2015-01-25 The 5 Reflections

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, dying, reflection, reflect, life, world, sit, zen center, thoughts, meditation, sickness, hellish, middle, death, contemplations, intoxication, day, called, chant, thinking

## SPEAKERS

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Morning. It's nice to sit with you. And in our Buddhist tradition, there is a number of reflections contemplations that our people are encouraged to do on a regular basis, sometimes on a daily basis. In the monastic world, this contemplation is done as part of the liturgy where people would chant these themes, these ideas every day. And as you chant them, you know kind of goes in and bounces off your ideas and thoughts and feelings and becomes part of your reflection part of your environment to have be reminded of these things. And what I'd like to do is to read one of the common reflections and chance and then talk about that a little bit. So, it goes something like this. I am subject to old age, I am not exempt from old age.

I am subject to illness. I am not exempt from illness. I am subject to death. I am not exempt from death. I must be parted and separated from everyone and everything dear and agreeable to me. I am the owner of my actions, the air of my actions. I have actions as my origin, action as my relative actions as my refuge. I will be the heir of whatever actions good or bad that I do. So, Those five reflections. And the closest I've come to doing this every day was I spent about a year every day. imagining that this day was my last day to be alive. And how would I live this last day? And I found it fascinating to in the morning to reflect, you know, the evening it's it and what would I do what was important for me to do and over the year, my my priorities shifted or looked at what was most important for me and kind of clarified a number of things for me. And it was a great reflection. It made me actually happy to do this reflection. It wasn't like this, you know, depressing thing to think about dying. I knew I wasn't probably not gonna die. So that helped.

But it was it was very meaningful for me to do And there's something about this as a chant as a reflection, which is just very Matter of fact, very straightforward is there's no charge for or against these reflections. He says, Just bring this up. So I am subject to dying. I will not be exempt from dying. I mean, that's kind of basic. You know, you've all kind of know that right? And so, but how do you relate to this idea that you're going to die? Some people, there's a wide range. Some people are really frightened. Some people can't wait. I mean, I know people I just this week, someone told me about a 90 some year old relative who really feel like it's time and but you know, the body keeps going. And some people are quite frightened. Some people. I know one, one relative of mine who refused to talk, he's in his 80's and refuses to talk about that whatsoever. No planning no nothing because, you know, it's, I guess it doesn't happen and, and so some people are horrified by this idea and come to IMC on a Sunday morning when you want to be inspired and nice weather. And we're gonna talk about death. It's sick sickness and all day To me, this is like, Oh, no, I shoulda gone for a hike. So there's all these, you know, attitudes. But the way this is this chant, and this kind of presented, it's very, very Matter of fact, there's no charge. This is this is how it is. And many people find it very meaningful, that in this Buddhist tradition that some of the basic human conditions that we have, are just kind of presented cleanly and

directly. This is true, this is what's happening. You know, there's not avoided, be frightened of it, and let's kind of be with it. So without any charge, but the tradition sometimes offers kind of a dichotomy, dichotomy, sort of polarity between two different ways of seeing sickness, old age and death. And one is in a myth of the Buddha. What motivated him to go off and seek His awakening is freedom. And it said that he saw the three or four divine messengers, heavenly messengers. And so when you're talking about heavenly messengers, divine, I mean that we're talking now we're talking about, you know, Good, I'm glad I came time See, divine, you know, it's like it's, it's maybe inspiring unless you're atheist. And then you worry. But the, you know, but it is something inspiring, divine sublime. Wonderful. So this is good news. But then the divine messengers are three at verse three are sickness, old age and death. And here they're looked at upon in a positive way, as something that's really has very important significance in terms of the Buddhist myth, being motivated to go forth and seekers awakening. And that is part of the myth is was he lived a very protected life. And so up until the time he was 29, believe or not, according to the myth. He did not encounter someone who was sick, someone who was old and someone who died. And so he went off into the foothills of the Himalayas, amylase, and there he encountered some dead person for the first time when he was 29. And that dead person was called a Heavenly Messenger, because it was so important. They actually, one of the myths is that everything was done to protect him from seeing these things. But these gods came along and morphed into a dead person or sick person just so he could see it, it wasn't a really sick person there it was just like, you know show. So on the other hand sickness, old age and death is sometimes talked about in the tradition as the great adversaries, you know, the great challenges sometimes kind of stronger language, even the enemies that pull us down that challenge us that destroy us the great you know, the great destructive forces in our life and, and sometimes are said to be the workings of the Buddhist devil this kind of a person called the Mara the God of temptation that kind of uses the forces of greed, hate and delusion to kind of, you know, at once keep people in that world.

So you have this kind of terrains you know, heavenly messengers or, you know, it's safe, more human terms. Some people find that sickness, old age, death is hellish. And some people think some of you have hellish experiences with some of the Things old age sickness. Maybe you've been close to dying and somehow our back, but it's been quite difficult and, and other people find there's something sublime or very powerful. One of the most powerful for me personally, meetings kind of a. We call it interviews one on one meetings with practitioner that I do kind of pastoral counseling was visiting a mother who's grown up with a 20 year old son had just died. And sitting with her and being with her and there's something about time, came to a stop sitting with her and it was I think both of us it was quite a meaningful time. And it wasn't like the grief was quite away. But we were just completely right. They're in the present moment together, and the humanity and the liveness of that moment being there. The stillness that we had and in kind of intimacy we had in that kind of space was certainly not hellish, you know, it was kind of in some way kind of sublime aside of some of the experiences I've had in deep meditation, have been just just being fully there for that. So in this kind of range from hellish to divine, comes this chance to have the nature of getting old. I am not exempt from this, I have the nature of getting sick, I'm not exempt with the second nature of dying. I'm not exempt. It comes from a particular discourse of the Buddha and the ancient world. And in this discourse, the Buddha says, For everyone, he says specifically for men, for women, for laypeople and for monastics, these are good things to reflect on to contemplate these five called the five reflections and the five contemplations, so it's kind of nice that he kind of presents this as universally good for everyone. And then he goes through and actually explains explains one of the reasons why it's useful to reflect on this. And he says that when you reflect on old age that that's going to be you know, if you're lucky enough, I once had that meeting with I was having a conversation with Blanche Hartman, who's used to be the Abbess of Zen center. She's in her 80s, mid 80s. Now, maybe, and, and you know, how we, you know, people get older, they start talking about their ailments. So, you know, I wasn't certainly not as old as her, but I know about

four or five years ago, I mentioned to her in passing, you know, an ailment that I had. And she said to me, he has kind of looked kind of very Matter of fact, kind of lovingly kind of as if she wasn't fazed at all. She said, if you if you're lucky enough to live that live long enough, this is what happens. If you're lucky enough to live that long, if you're fortunate, you have the good fortune to live this it, this is what happens. They kind of put a whole different slant on it. As opposed to Oh no, this is the only one that is happening to and this is, this is the end and this is terrible. like Oh, of course, of course. This kind of reflection kind of lends itself to a wonderful Of course, when you get sick when you get old, when you're when you're dying, of course. So, what the Buddha said is that when you reflect on that you're going to get old. You helps people overcome the intoxication with youth. And not that any of you are intoxicated with you. But there are a lot of You know, attitudes we have about youth about the importance of being young. We have a whole, you know, industry, huge industry, billion dollar industry to keep people young and advertisements in popular culture that really holds up youth in a big way. And some people you know, are horrified when they look in the mirror the first time and there's a wrinkle. This is the end downhill from here. And so there's intoxication with youth and being young sometimes, or the fear or the fear of becoming old and all the associations we have to have with it. You know, no one's going to love me anymore if I have too many wrinkles, something and their reflection with with sickness that I'm going to be sick, is that to be overcome the intoxication with health.

And so you can reflect I don't know exactly what the Buddha meant by intoxication with health but you can imagine that sometimes there's a sometimes people don't realize how at They are to being healthy until they become unhealthy. how important their self identity has been around being young or self identity has been created around being healthy and fit and be able to do a lot of things. And not a few people have an accident or something happens. And it's devastating for their self identity, their place in the world, how other people see them. And they get very depressed, very upsetting. And I've known people who've gone through that and come out the other end and said, that was the best thing that ever happened to me. Because I had no idea was caught up in you know, maybe intoxicated in the idea of my health and activity and my identity. And there's something that I had to let go of that was so deep in me that I feel so much freer now and lighter. It's a drag this had to happen. I wish it didn't happen. But there's freedom now that I had I didn't have before because I have to face this. I have one relevant relative who went through this and had went through very, very similar thing but her conditions been chronic for decades. And she said this was great. But enough is enough. You know, this is this is this is long enough now I got the lesson, ready to go you know. And then the third one, being aware that you're going to die, I suppose in toxic overcomes the intoxication with life and certainly there can be a very strong attachment to life and being alive. And you know, I don't want anyone to die. The I don't want to die, but it can be the attachment it can be excessive. And my introduction to Buddhism, there were my first kind of inkling that I wanted to do Buddhist practice was when I was about 19 or 20. And I was aware of that I was afraid to die. And I felt this, I felt like I couldn't really live the life and live the values I wanted to live, unless I kind of somehow faced and overcame this fear of dying. And so I looked around and somehow I had a sense that the only place I knew at that time that would address this in some psychological or deep way was Buddhism Buddhist practice. And that was kind of my first I didn't it didn't get me practicing yet. But you know, I was 19. But that was the first when I first started studying and looking into it took a couple of years before I started practicing regularly. So we sit in the middle of our life is a kind of a metaphor for what Buddhist practice is about, you know, we did study of meditation is so central to our tradition. And the idea of meditation is that meditation is supposed to be at the mat like the chant like this, reflect Five contemplations, just a matter of fact, way of meeting our life as it actually is. It's not not meant to kind of look at our life as being divine, and not meant to look at our life as being hellish. but rather to just be sitting in the middle of it as it actually is, if it's pleasant and wonderful, to sit in the middle, if it's difficult to sit in the middle, and this idea of sitting in the middle of our life, as it is, is one of the learning to do that three minute is one of the great things that meditation

can do for us. And I want to talk a little bit about how that works. The one of the ways that simple things about sitting down to meditate is not to be too not to do too much when you meditate not to have a big idea of what you're supposed to do when accomplish and get someplace like really concentrated but rather To sit quietly and, and watch what goes on sit quietly just be with what is. And that simply being with what is and watching is very different than how most people live their lives. Where so for example, if I am caught up in anything at all Sam thinking about worrying about my health, you know, I'm anxious that you know, my health is fine now but it's gonna be five fine and five years from now. And will the people around me support me will be left alone. There could be real concerns and real issues that people have to think about. It's not necessarily neurotic to think about your health.

But if some people have huge challenges and even anticipating what's going to come but they're those those thoughts come up. And in ordinary life, it's very easy to be swept up in those thoughts and be identified with those thoughts and kind of react to those thoughts and Imagination kicks in you think about what five years what is going to happen to me and, and we swirl and spin and then emotions arise in response to that fear and anger and discouragement, many things arise. And it's kind of just a swirl of activity that goes on and we're involved in participating in it. When you sit just when you are sitting, and just being and watching, sooner or later, you begin to just see it. Oh, I'm thinking about this a lot. Boy, am I thinking a lot. And that begins a step away, of becoming freer. And then you start seeing Well, maybe, I mean, we don't identify so strongly with it. And then you see, you know, I'm very much in my imagination around my health. I'm anticipating what's going to happen in a few years. I'm gonna anticipate this in that I want some years ago. got a call from a doctor, my doctor She said, she said, Oh, we got the results back. And I think we hit you have cancer. That was interesting. And it was even more interesting. I was in a toy store at the time. You know, the cell phones, right? I picked up the cell phone, my doctor, yes. What the result test results came back. And you know, it looks like you have cancer, the tumor markers are really high. I said, Oh, so I got pretty interested. And I got Oh, this is great. I thought I was actually kind of not troubled because Oh, now I finally get to find out if all these years of Buddhist practices made a difference. You know, I didn't you know, that's, you know, 19 I was interested, right? So then, you know, 35 years later or something, you know, so what, you know, that was actually more interested than worried. Let's see what happens now. So to sit there and sit and read And watch the thought arise about the imaginary future and say, Oh, that's imagination. I'm imagining a future. And based on that imagination, look at that there's fear that's arising. And start seeing, seeing it clearly for what it is, oh, it's an imagination and it's a fear around an imaginary world. Who knows what's gonna happen in the future? Like a who knows, the doctor called me up? turned out, I didn't have cancer at all. It was like she then she later she called down ecologist and she said, No, nothing going on. It's very strange, right? And, but, so. So, so, you know, so, you know, you could imagine a doctor cause imagination kicks in, right? You know, this is, you know, I could have written you know, I didn't I didn't do it, but I could imagine writing a whole novel. But what was now in store for me, you just have one phone call, but I kind of so so you sit in the middle and we see how this operates. And the magic, the specialness of meditation is when we begin to not identify with our thoughts or much not identify with the feelings. And we just start seeing it, letting it be. And we start kind of letting it be. And just just there we see it clearly for what it is, oh, just an imagination is just a thought. It's just a judgment. It's just a, or even you somebody's just a fear. It's just anger. It's just a spear different things. And it's have to start thinking a little bit separate from it, and letting it be instead of participating in it. And as that ability becomes stronger, and that's kind of that's the that's what I mean by sitting in the middle of our life. And just sitting there until we start seeing clearly for what is what's happening. And as it becomes stronger and stronger, that ability to sit in the middle of it and allow our life to unfold. The thoughts, the feelings, the emotions, Without participating without getting caught in the thoughts, the ideas, the feelings that are connected to it, then a certain certain level of sense of inner stability and peace begins to become stronger. And we start identifying more that inner stability and peace, then we identify with thoughts and

ideas and the feelings we have. And we're not condemning the feelings and thoughts. We're not trying to necessarily pushing them away. But we're just seeing more and more clearly, this is what it is, this is what it is.

And, and some of our thoughts might even meet a true thoughts. Someone might be treating us very poorly, and we see that and we feel angry because of it. But we see the anger as the anger. And because even though it might be justified to be angry, angry, we don't participate in the anger. We just Oh, just anger is floating up there. Let it just be anger there. And I'm not the angry I'm not the angry one. There's anger in the scene, because you've learned to step back and to see it just to be in the middle of all this. This is a powerful thing to do. Many years ago I did a workshop we can workshop lead one on death and dying. And I did a I did an exercise with people, based on my kind of what I'd done, you know, my year of thinking, but that was the last day. And I said, kind of had them all meditate and get calm and quiet. And then I said, Now reflect. If you only have one more week to live, how would you live this last week? What would you do? So as that silence, let them reflect on that for a while. And then now imagine you only have a day left. What would you do? Would you Who would you talk to or what kind of things would you do is your last day to be alive and now Like, oh, that and now let's reflect that you have three hours left. What would you do? Three hours left. And then I say now imagine you have one hour. Now imagine you have 10 minutes 10 minutes, you're 10 minutes alive to be alive. You're probably not gonna be concerned anymore about your promotion at work. All kinds of thoughts and ideas. I need to get my oil change in my car. I haven't made the appointment to the dentist for a while. Certain things begin to fall away. And then one minute what happens it's just really a poignant poignancy of just one more minute to be alive. What happened? What's that like? What happens there. Now if you carry with All your thoughts and feelings and imaginations and everything, then you can be swirling and churning and lost in that. But if you have the ability to let go of your dental appointments, oil changes and you know all the many things and just kind of be there for the last minute What happens? And then the last exercise was, what would you do if you if this was the last moment, the last breath, but then it was very powerful experience with people doing it one person a year later told me after that exercise, I went back to work and resigned. And I said, Oh, no. What have I done? But this was like this is probably almost 20 years ago, and I've known her Ever since and she that was the best thing that ever happened to me. I mean, she was she was maybe 60 then so she retired. But that was the best thing that but there was another woman who did that it was doing the workshop, and I asked people, how was it for you? And she said, Oh, I live about an hour away from their retreat center. And when I had, you know, you know, week, a day, three hours left. What I would do is I'd go home and clean my apartment. But when it was less than an hour, I couldn't go home anymore was too far. So then I was really there, then I was really present in a way that hadn't been present before my life. So this you know, so to learn to let go have many of our concerns, some of them petty, some of them very serious. And then perhaps it was for me sitting over there with a mother whose son had died. There's something about letting go in the timeless piece that can happen, the liberation and freedom can happen there.

So we sit they did meditation is to sit in the middle of our lives and learn not to be reactive to our lives and to what it is to step back and to see clearly what the mind the heart is doing, what goes on in our bodies and minds. And to kind of let it be and in that letting be to not be pulled into it or reacting to it, participating in the thoughts participating in the feelings, but to step back, and then at some point, we see some of these things are so unnecessary, some of the things we think about That in seeing is unnecessary, to learn to let go of them, to learn to not think not, but not not just simply not to, not to somebody to have some distance from it, but to let go. And so in that, in that space any intoxication we have any way we're caught up in our life, in our youth, in our health, in our in life itself is not so interesting anymore. It's there's something much more interesting going on. What's interesting to go on



is the capacity for deep abiding sense of peace, or well being or ease or freedom, or joy and happiness, whatever it might be for you, that comes from a mind which is not caught up by the conditions of the world. And this reflection on sickness, old age and death is a very You know, makes this whole thing very real, very important. We're talking about central issues in our lives. We're not talking about stress reduction. You know, we're not talking about, you know, oh yeah, I think I'll let go mascara. No, not that. Sorry. I don't want to be too challenging here today. The nothing wrong to mascara but to be intoxicated with it. I hope that meditation helps with that. When I was practicing at the San Francisco Zen Center, the new kind of monastic ethos there and so people can hear what the idea was, you know, no makeup, no, nothing. Just very plain. And this Zen teacher for wonderful Zen teacher in the Marine Stewart Roshi from Boston came to teach there one day one one week and she wore makeup and many of the women at Zen center felt liberated Wow, it's okay to wear makeup Zen teacher so, you know, it's possible to get attached you know all kinds of every possible way right. So to to develop and strengthen the capacity to meditate to be present and not caught by what goes on. Then when we up against sickness, old age and death when you're up against some of the great challenges of our life and many more than that, but the very challenges of our lives then we have the mental capacity to be sitting The middle of it and stay calm or stay, keep our ears not get swept away by the anxiety concerns, anger, fears that might be connected to it. It's quite something. Yesterday I saw Selma. And, you know, I've met people who were in the solarized movement. And I don't know exactly how they were in their hearts and minds, but to be able to keep your balance and your and your non reactivity in the face of that kind of hate in the face of that kind of violence takes a very strong capacity. And so how do you develop that capacity? How do you kind of live in the middle of your life? Who knows what you're going to be asked to face? Who knows what you're going to be asked to be engaged? You know, I don't think Martin Luther King saw it coming when he was 20 years old. What he was gonna be asked to do. When he was 24, I think is when he was asked to lead part of the civil rights movement in the south. And that grew from there as leadership but who knows what you're going to have to deal with your family with yourself with the world around you, who knows. And so to sit and meditate and practice is to learn how to sit in the middle. Not to overemphasize the divine not to overemphasize the hellish with learn, just sit in the middle of whatever it is that you're given that day for that that time and learn how to just let it be.

And when you come to your death, your deathbed much you let go of how much you hadn't had the capacity to just be there and not deny it and not run away from it not run around. What used to be a new one man who spent a year of being anxious he was in your lifetime. Being an anxious person. And one of the things he was most anxious about was dying of cancer. And when he got cancer and was dying, he finally stopped being anxious. It was remarkable to be around him. And it's quite remarkable to be around some individuals who, when they're dying, have just learned to let go deeply. And it just, they're in a very simple way. Or I've been around people who've been horribly sick, but they're just there. And it's just quite inspiring to see what the courage is strength, the ability just to be there and not be swept up in the meaning in the associations and reactivity to pain, all kinds of things. So, this reflection goes on not just sickness, old age and death, but also then reflection on you'll be separated from everything that you love. sooner, ultimately you die. That's what happens, the more they die, that's what happens. And then The last one has to do with really understanding that your actions count, you're the heir to your actions. The actions are your source, the actions are, you know, they're your refuge, that start to start kind of understanding that the choices you make and how you act are a major consequences in this whole ability to address there are peace or ease in this life. And so this ability to stop and meditate and really be be still nonreactive not caught up not participating anything is very powerful because it shows us more and more places of choice. We can choose, we can choose what thoughts to get involved in what, what actions to get involved in what things to say and not say. And we can see that in the place of choice in the middle of choice. We can arrest. If we can see the place of choice interactions, it's possible to rest in that place of choice. As opposed to automatically and

continuously acting and speaking and doing, and to find a place of rest in the middle of life is a great thing. And then your choices can be much wiser. So the final thing I like to say about this, sutta this discourse of the Buddha that these five reflections come from the first half of it talks about as I did now about these five reflections having to do with you, it's in first person, I have the nature of being coming old. I'm not exempt from it. Then the second half of it says, it's also useful to reflect that this is true for other people too. Others have the same nature. And I think that they to begin to appreciate and see other people this way, changes our hearts to them, and opens our hearts to them when they also are dealing with sickness, old age and death. They will sooner or later they are Just like you, and the idea of seeing others as yourself and yourself and others, is a place of empathy, beginning of empathy of care and all this, and to see it in this very basic way. You know, this very, you know, of sickness, old age and death, being, being separated from what you love. That's what human beings have in common. We have differences, and we have similarities. But these existential similarities we have, can be the foundation for having care and love and generosity to the people around us. And to care for them to understand their struggles as well. And then with that similarity, to appreciate their differences, and to and then to open to them in a way that's respectful and caring. It was quite something, you know, to this last week, thinking a lot about Martin Luther King. I was reading about him more and then I went to see the movie. Yes. Today, and in some of the movie was awful to watch and sort of your side. But one of the things one of the reflections was, May was they showed people white people expressing hate towards the people protesting and things and but but I also looked earlier in the week I looked at film footage and photographs of those times. And they also had photographs and film footage of white hate.

And the movie made it pretty dated nice. You know, because the faces I saw in the photographs from the 60s in the movies was was so intense that the actors didn't do a good enough job on the movie. Maybe they didn't want it to do it, make it really real. The level of hate that the people are capable of, is phenomenal, phenomenal and some people have to live with this. And so to sit in the middle of all this, sit and learn how to sit In the middle, to sit quietly and be with ourselves to the middle of sickness, age old old age and death, and to understand have a heart open up to others, as well see them in their sickness, old age and death see them and how they have to part from there. So, one of the most moving parts of the movie for me was actually in particular character was a real character, whose It was his grandson had been shot and killed by a trooper in front of him. And it was an old man who was 82 year old man. And he the way he held it way he acted the grief and presented the grief and was so real that was real. And into that, you know, to what do we know? What do we do to each other? How do we feel the others difficult and challenging life is and Can we sit in the middle of that with a heart that's relaxed and open up Calm, that's a peaceful and take it in understanding deeply, so that we can respond wisely and courageously to what this world will need of us. Because I suspect that sooner or later, and I think it's sooner, our world needs us to be more courageous. And the world needs us to change needs things to change. So they're sitting in the middle and reflecting on sickness, old age and death. And yourself and others and learning to have ease with that and learn to free ourselves from all the swirl. thoughts and reactions activity, just be here, I think becomes a great gift we can give the others into the world. So the five reflections maybe if we maybe for one week, or one year, one lifetime, you might make this a theme for your days. Just come back. It's the nature to be old. Just those first three, that's all you can remember nature the old to get sick and to die without any charge. just recognize that and see what happens. Thank you very much