

Four Foundations of Mindfulness - Week 4: Contemplation of Death

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So I am in the middle of offering a series of talks on the four foundations of mindfulness, and these are the classic teachings for the or the kind of are the core teachings that the Buddha gave that became the instructions for mindfulness. That much of the modern mindfulness movement uses, and the instructions there are much more involved in what's usually taught with thirteen different exercises. Some of them are quite different from each themselves, and quite different in how mindfulness is usually taught. And now one of them I am going to do today, which is the instructions in developing awareness by contemplating corpses. So why would that be a mindfulness exercise?

The most people associate mindfulness with kind of a non-discursive, aware, non-judgemental mindfulness awareness of what's happening in the present moment. And this particular exercise seems to be more of a contemplation or visualization practice, which seems very different than what we usually think of mindfulness. And one of the reasons why it's included in this sort of set of instructions is what we're trying to do with the practices, these practices of mindfulness, is to cultivate a heightened sense of awareness. And it turns out that spending time with a corpse is one of the ways to develop a heightened sense of awareness. I see some action out there that better out there, I was off. So I can't give a little background, a little story.

Personal story: When I was about twenty or twenty one, I lived in on a farm, a small dairy farm. And while I was there, the two farmers who owned the farm, I took the occasion to take a vacation for seven days, and I was left in charge of the farm, and one of them just me and the gas. With the gas were the cows, and we were quite intimate, as I had to milk them regularly,

and one of them. So it turned out, in my life, I was twenty one years old. I had never spent seven days alone. The first time in my life.

And the only one I saw during those seven days was down the road. I saw the mail carrier come once, and otherwise there was no one. And I would go out in the morning, take the cows out to pasture during the morning, and leave them out there, and go out and get them in the evening to come back and milk and otherwise took care of the farm and I had a grand time. It was a wonderful time. But one of the aspects of this was, as the days went along and near the end of that time, I started noticing that everything that I looked at sparkled, and just like everything stood out in high light, I saw the details of things that usually I walked right by and never noticed, and everything kind of sparkled, and it felt really nice.

There's that kind of there was something about just being present and seeing the world in this live way was new for me. And then I also became highly sensitive to my thoughts. I'd never kind of been so aware that I was thinking as I was during this silent week, and my thoughts also sparkled. It was kind of like everything that I was aware of kanalike I had a special I don't know sparkle or light or clarity to it. There was quite kind of satisfying to see, very happy to see, and I felt very peaceful. And what was happening to me that as my social life disappeared, and the usual acting activities of the social life kind of stopped, and I was just left in this calm, quiet environment that was, in some ways, like being on retreat.

My attachment involved in or my thinking decreased, and as it decreased, my awareness of the present moment and my awareness itself became stronger, and that heightened sense of awareness was deeply satisfying. I felt so I felt so like a kind of feeling like everything is perfect was kind of the feeling of it, even though maybe if I used my logic I could have easily decided about that many things were not very perfect. But this was not an logical event. It was just a settling of the mind, and this awakening of this heightened sense of clarity. That was so nice. It was so nice that it became my task, my quest after I left that farm, to learn how to be alone that way with others.

I didn't see that I wanted to be a hermit, but I wanted to learn to be with people. And it made me able to maintain that heightened sense of awareness in relation to other people, because when my friends came back to the farm, it quickly went away. While I was there, also on this farm, I was present for the first birth of some creature that I'd ever seen in my life, the birth of a cow, a calf. And that was pretty special, as well, the calf was being born. Its head was coming out for it, and there was a kind of sack around the head, like a siren wrap or something. You can see through it.

And as the head came out, suddenly the you know, the head looking though the siren wrap

looked like it was asleep and now or not alive. And then the sack broke, and then suddenly the eyes opened up, and the calf took a breath, and it was like, Wow, you know, life, it just got, just happened in front of me, just like, Boom, where did that come from? And again, logically, I could have told you where it came from. I watched where it came from, but there as nothing special about seeing it get born. That was stopped my mind. And again, this heightened sense of awareness like time stopped all my concern, stopped everything, anything, that everything in the universe existed right there, just there because it was such a special moment.

And then we had there had been some sheep that had somehow escaped, maybe the year before, and spent about a year living in the hills and mountains around the farm, and through the winter cold winter Rina and A. And in some time in the spring we decided that they, you know, they belonged to the farm, the farmers. We decided that we go get them, capture them. And that was a huge kind of comedy trying to corral them and catch them. And so we did finally, and we brought them back. I think we only got all of them. We got one of them back at least, and we brought it back.

And what we didn't know was that sheep that have escaped into the wild kind of got wild don't do well when they come back into captivity, and so that the one we caught died not too long after. And so then I saw death, and there again, in a different way, not a little more heavier way. It was also like time stop, like everything. Seeing this, the sheep, you know, this one is like, No, it's a very special moment for this heightened sense of presence and awareness.

So this a few days ago, on Friday, I took a bunch of people to somewhere here, went with us. I don't know anything anybody else went, but to the anatomy lab at a local community college to look at cadavers. And the people I brought were people who are being trained to do chaplaincy, to offer spiritual care in places like hospitals and hospices and prisons and places like that. And so every year we take them to this anatomy lab for a few hours, and now we see corpses in various states of not decay, but in various states of dissection being dissected. We saw one that had not been dissected yet. We saw one that was quite taken apart and we saw one that was mostly the skin was taken off, and see all the muscles.

And some of these people, chaplains in training, one or two, they wanted to know, Why are you taking us to the anatomy lab to see corpses? What is it? How is it? What is it to do with it? A chaplain. So training, and I didn't answer the question. I just turned the question back on them. What do you think? I said, and they came up with great answers on their own.

But one of the answers is that our chaplains need to have dealt with some of the reactions.

They have to be in the presence of death before they enter the hospital and are supposed to offer spiritual care for people who are dying or in a situation where someone has died. And so they have to kind of be able to be present and comfortable, and comfortable to write a word, but not reactive to it, and be able to be maybe one of the calmer people in the room at that time, because you can't really offer much spiritual care if you are the most agitated one. And so to be able to kind of meet the reaction, see what's going on, but also to be able to contemplate, What is this thing about life and death? What is it that we're being present for? Who are we to be able to kind of drop into some other, contemplate or consider some of these deep questions about life and death, and maybe begin kind of seeing people in a different way than you would see if you don't have that.

And then many years ago, I did a week and kind of workshop on death and dying with Stephen Levine, who just died a few weeks ago, and he was and one of them, he was a master at what he did. So quite awesome, quite amazing to watch him. But what was most impactful for me was that before it started, you know, I'd been a hippy, and then I'd been a zany, and before going there, and so I found myself in Marin County with all these what looked to me like ordinary people, completely ordinary people, whatever that is. And you know, the courtyard before we went in for the workshop, all the Loksesenice people, ordinary people living ordinary life. And then we went into the workshop, and they started to speak, and their lives were not ordinary. Their lives were, you know, their child had died, or they were dying, or the story after story of death and dying came out. And these, most of the people there, were really confronting something very profound and important, and lots of grief, and lots of powerful things.

And Stephen Levine would meet them fully present, and somehow the ability to counsel them, or guide them, or support them, to somehow work through or resolve or touch something really profound in them that had to be touched. And I was going wide eyed. And after that experience, I no longer think people are ordinary, you know, just I don't know. There than mill people, just people, whatever. Now I don't take people for granted, because, you know, I had a, you know, who knows what's going on in the depths of people, and their life experience, and what their struggles are, and their shoes are. And, you know, you can't really tell just from the face. So now I feel much, much more cautious of the right word, but much more respectful. Now I don't know this person. Let's find out.

So going to see these cadavers on Friday. The anatomist who was guiding us to it was quite a generous, very generous and very kind person, very supportive person. And one of the first things she told us was the bodies. We were going to see where were bodies that represented

the offering, the gift of someone who wanted their body to be used for education, or for research, or for medical purposes. And so the context of going into the anatomy lab was one of kind of respecting the generosity of the people who had died and what they were offering us to do. And so I wouldn't say Nasilie was reverend, was reverence going in to see them, but there was a kind of real care and attention to what were doing.

And I said, I sat in, I came in, and looked at these bodies that were there, and the anatomist told us how the bodies got there, and we can kind of calculate they probably died about nine months before that takes, but six months to prepare a body for to go into and out my lapse. Six months, you know, take well. So about nine, six to nine months before, and I thought, I bet these people have relatives and friends who were still alive, and maybe if I'm walking down the street, maybe I'll walk by them, maybe our pass will cross. And that's not one of the reflections I went by my head this year when I went to the Natymylap. And again, I felt all these connections and people, and how special it is, you know, to be present for someone when they're alive, how special it is to be present for someone when they pass. And so it became kind of a greater kind of sense of reverence or care or appreciation for just life, and the connections and relationships, and friendships and all these things that can be there.

For some of the chaplain students, it became a powerful contemplation about the difference between being alive and being dead, between a living person and a corpse, because it's really clear that you look at a corpse that's been dead for nine months. That well preserved but still dead is there's no life in it. You touch them, and they're cold, and there's, you know, the spark of life is not there. What I think about is a spark of awareness. Consciousness is not there. There's various theories about what happens to consciousness when I die, but certainly whatever consciousness is, it's not there in that body any more. And if consciousness is not so connected to the body, because you know that I don't know. I don't know what it is. But it's I have it now. You have it now.

And there's something about being in the presence of death, and then in to sit, considering, Oh, I am going to be like that one day. One day, I'm going to be just matter, lifeless, inanimate matter. And lying there probably on some laying somewhere. Most people are laying for a while once they're dead. And it might even, you know, so it might be. It might be in a morgue. You might be all kinds of places. You might end up. And so what is it we have now? What's the difference? What is that makes it what's unique about being alive now.

And some people, when they contemplate this, start feeling much more kind of a cause of the reverence or the specialness or the spark of what it's like to be conscious now. It's very different in thinking about where you've been, where you've come from, what's happened in

your life, or where you're going, and what might happen to you. Now, those kinds of thoughts, in some ways, take you away from the spark of awareness or attention, which is only present in the present moment, something we often overlook. And to have a sense of the specialness of being alive and present is quite a powerful thing. Some people, when they are coming in to encounter death, than dying is to they reflect about their own lives. They think, I reflect about their own death. And in the contact of death and life, how do you want to live now?

And some people begin changing their priorities in their life when they've think about they're going to die. Why I led the Death and Dying week end workshop many years ago, and we did some exercises and various things. And about a few years later, I met a woman who had been in it, and she had been kind of a high level executive type person, some not very big non profit. And she said to me, Oh, Gill, thank you so much for that workshop you led. I came back from that week end and resigned for my job. And the first thing I did was gulp, Oh no, oh no, what have I done? And she said, No, I'm so happy. This is the best thing that could have happened to me. She was able to retire. She was getting close to the age I guess it was the age she could retire.

And she said, You know, it was the best thing I could have done. I realized my priorities changed, and it no longer made sense for me to continue engaged in this kind of work. I wanted to spend the last years of my life doing something much more meaningful for me than what was doing that work. So sometimes encounter with death changes people's priorities, and what's most important then stands out. Why wait? Do it now. Sometimes in the code, in the context of death, we view issues in our life in a different way. The resentments we have, the hurts that we hold, the desires we have, the ambitions we have, the editions we have, the you know, all kinds of things are standing out in high light. And the question is, is it worth holding on to these things? Is it? Is it worth it to be under the burden of certain kinds of attachment, certain kinds of ways of thinking?

And this is where the wonderful way that, or sometimes in the presence of death, the thinking mind stops. The usual thinking mind stops. Now, only some you might have been with some one who's dying, or soon after the letter die. They're dead. Most people, that's not true for everyone. But most people find that you know you're not sitting there at the bedside of some one who just died and you are wondering where a good place is to change your oil your car because your oil needs to be changed, and you haven't done it for a while, and you wonder how long you can go without changing it, and you know you don't kinda go down that track very long. You know, it's a lot of the petty concerns or small concerns or big concerns stop, and there's a whole different kind of heightened awareness and presence that may be, is

some can be something like what happened to me on that farm when I was left alone a week. It's kind of like being on a retreat, and to feel that and sense that, and to appreciate that. This is valuable. This is a very satisfying way to be alive, to be alive in a seclusion without attachments, without distractions, preoccupations.

To be fully present and awake now, to be here with your awareness, the spark of it, without fear, without considering the future, and even considering that we're going to die just here in a full way, is very powerful. So this change of priority, this development of heightened awareness in the contact, in the contact with death, is I think is one of the reasons why, in these thirteen exercises for cultivating heightened awareness, this mindfulness, the contemplation of death, is included as one of the exercises. So with us, as an introduction, I'll read you the contemplation and the and it is. The way its presented is it's not presented as if you really go through a charnel ground in ancient India, the charnel grounds. Not every one could afford to be cremated that cause, you know, that takes a lot of wood and stuff. So it was very common for people just to be taken out to this charnel grounds on the edge outside. It was far enough away from people lived, and they leave bodies there, and nature would take care of it. What was going to happen there, but is to imagine this.

It's interesting how I remember this was written in India, and I think India even to this day, compared to probably what was like much of the world until recent times. Death was much more part of ordinary life. It wasn't so foreign to ordinary life. I grew up in the suburbs, very much in suburbs. And I didn't see anything like that until I was eleven, and I went to I happened to go to cut a mando, and there they were carrying a young child through the streets on a stretcher down to the river to do the cremation. And I've never seen anything like that. So this kind of going to seeing a charnel ground. Knowing a charnel ground might seem strange to us, but it was probably the more common in the ancient world. So this is more of a visualization than actually going there.

As though one were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground one, two, or three days dead, bloated, livid, and oozing matter. A person compares this same body, one's own body. Thus this body too, my body too, is of the same nature. It will be like that. It is not exempt from that fate. So this is the reflection. You visualize as kind of corpse, and then you think, All this will happen to me too. This is the practice is being offered. So this refrain appears after each of these like five or six visualizations. This body, too, is of the same nature. It will be like that. It is not exempt from that fate.

As though one were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals, and various kinds of worms, a person compares this same body with the following thoughts: This body, too, is of the same nature. It will be like that. It is not exempt from that fate.

Again, as though one were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, a skeleton with flesh and blood held together with sinews, or a fleshless skeleton smeared with blood held together with sinews, or a skeleton without flesh and blood held together with sinews, or as a bunch of disconnected bones scattered in all directions. Here a hand bone there, a foot bone there, a shin bone there, a thigh bone here, a hip bone there, a backbone here, a rib bone there, a breastbone here, an arm bone there, a shoulder bone there, a neck bone there, a jawbone here, a tooth there the skull. A person compares this same body thus: This body, too, is of the same nature. It will be like that. It is not exempt from that fate.

One last one: As though one were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, bones bleached white, the colour of shells, or the bones heaped up more than a year old, or the bones rotted and crumbled to dust. A person compares this same body with it. This body too is of the same nature. It will be like that. It is not exempt from that fate.

So Kanda goes through a whole process of decay, starting from just a day or two old corpse. We are just being going to dust, and this too is our fate somehow. And so to contemplate this in a way that's not morbid, to contemplate this in a way that's not depressing, but rather come contemplate this in such a way that it helps us really be present for this life we have right here, to really kind of take this life in more serious, so we really can give ourselves to be fully present. They say that the people who are fully engaged in life are the ones that are least afraid of death kind of interesting kind of statistics that researchers have found out. But to be fully here to this life, this moment, what is it to be alive? What is it to be conscious? Do we know that we can live some way after it be alive or continue after we die? Maybe we don't. Maybe we won't. If you believe in rebirth, maybe you'll come back as an earthworm, and you know what kind of you know. You don't know what kind of consciousness you'll have then.

So what we have now is, in Buddhism, is considered very special. To be a human, to be born a human being is considered one of the most precious births to have. And so what is it to be a person? How is it to squander this opportunity of being a person, a human being? What is

it we can discover not through what we do, not through accomplishments, not through who we are connected to? But what is it we can wake up to? What sense of aliveness and presence, and more importantly, a sense of freedom, can we wake up to? So that this moment, as we walk through this world, in this life, this moment that we are of find something. The canal may be the cloak, sometimes some of the clarity, the preciousness, the heightened awareness, the satisfaction, the peace, the at homeness that I experienced when I was on that farm in Norway. You know that you've probably some of you experience in other ways.

So one of the exercises in the mindfulness exercise to help with the developing mindfulness is to do this contemplation practice of contemplating, thinking about, or visualizing death, the corpse, the process of decay. Some of you might find this interesting to do. You might find it helpful. Some of you might find it unhelpful to do. And now there is no requirement to do it. The approach in Buddhism you do what's helpful, not what is helped, what's unhelpful. But you might see if this contemplation of corpses and death and decay, whether there's some way of contemplating and considering it that is for your betterment, supports you in some important way. And you might even find a good friend who doesn't mind talking about these things, and explore this topic of death, decay, corpses, finality of life, and see if you can have a conversation, and explore it, and have a conversation to see what is it about how we can really face up to or face this issue of our mortality and what's going to happen to us so that it's for our betterment? It enhances our life rather than diminishes it.

So those are my thoughts on this exercise of mindfulness. We have about ten minutes. If any of you would like to ask some questions, or make some comments or express some reactions to this, you're welcome to. You can use the microphone.

Hello, can I, having just lost both of my parents and well want one more recently and contemplating the body of a parent and knowing most of their life, having seen it? My question is how to shape the thoughts that tend towards suffering as a result of the death and the loss, because what I hear in me is resentment that I have to suffer this loss. And so it gets back to how to approach that kind of suffering.

I think a thing now's important to be very, very respectful for the loss, especially loss of a parent, the grief of all the different feelings that can come. There can be a wide spectrum of emotions that come up as a result. They're all allowed. They all are all important. To allow them space and time and not be in a hurry to, you know, get rid of them or fix them or something like that because you don't know what's working through you. You don't know what's what needs to kind of digest and percolate in. And a lot of what the mindfulness practice does in this regard is to help us identify ways in which we interfere with the grieving process,

interfere with what we're feeling, what's going on.

Oh, I shouldn't feel resentful, my parents. After all, you know, I shouldn't be resentful. For example, someone might think, or some people are just so happy finely, you know, and that's, you know, so you now suppose to think that way about your, you know, your beloved parents, that you're finally, you know, don't have the burden having to care for them or something. Anything's allowed. So you kind of get out of the way, get out of the way. Don't judge it. Don't second guess it. Don't try to fix it, and give it time and support. And sometimes it's helpful to have other people you talk to, and you do offer you support. You can offer that kind of presents you are comfortable with, not trying to, you know, fix things when you are grieving. So then that's really important.

And then, in addition, what you can do, and it will be more directly in relation to your question. If, sometimes, it's useful to not as a way of pushing away the thoughts of resentment you have, but to see if there's other ways that you can look upon the death, especially if someone is a parents right? In what way might it be a gift that they die what way, my what kind of gift is that in their death towards their daughter? An answer that comes is that their whole life was a gift. And how does that perspective do for you? I guess it allows that there can be an ending. It's an ability to appreciate what was, instead of resent that it no longer is.

And then now it'll be. As this exercise says, you'll also have the same fate. This will happen to you, and now I don't know how your parents died, but does. Sometimes a death of a parent is also a showing the way that you know, so maybe prepares you for what it's getting your time. I mean, I think it's one of the gifts a parent can give to their children is to help them show them that dying is a natural part of life, and show them that they're not afraid. If they aren't afraid, if they are afraid, maybe it's a different lesson. Or they are not angry at dying, but show them how to meet and face death in a in a peaceful way, you know, beautiful way. And then that death becomes a gift.

You can't hear her. You can't hear out there. Oh, I see. We're just about done. I want to just finish one more thing. And then we'll stop. And I saw, you know, death. You never know when death comes. And the death of the electric equipment. I've told this story a number of times. I counsel a woman who was dying of cancer, and she hadn't a ten, eleven year old son or daughter, and she was really angry at having to die because of her daughter. Mostly it makes some sense, right? Terrible thing to happen to a child. And I told her that the most and one of the most important influences she is going to have on her child's life was how she died. And if she died angry, that would affect a child's view of life for the rest of the child's life. But if she could die peacefully, then that would have a different conditioning, a different

lesson that a child would get.

And so some weeks after she died, her husband called me up and explained that she had died, and she died peacefully in bed. And when she died, the father went out with the child out into the garden and got a flower and brought it back and put it on her chest. And when I heard that, I thought that probably she had taken to heart what I said, and she had figured out how to die in such a way, hopefully sincerely, so that it could be a gift to her daughter rather than a burden. So, you know, we're all going to die, and some people lead the way. Hopefully they can show us the way, and it can be a gift. I don't know about you, your parents. But one way or the other, even if they had a hard time dying, there's something about that also that becomes a gift if we learn the lessons of that. I don't know if that dresses your question well enough, but I hope that I was at least respectful of your question. Thank you all.