

Foundations of Mindfulness Part 7 - Contemplating Death

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Armadillos might not be so safe because I made a talk about corpses today, so hopefully some of you knew that was coming. So it turns out that in a number of religious traditions, some of the people who have devoted themselves to a serious life of practice—usually people considered to be monastics—will adopt a practice of looking death right in the eye, not avoiding it. And in Catholicism, it's called memento mori, remembering death. And there's all kinds of wonderful little stories of Catholic monks and maybe nuns who will do various kinds of death contemplations. One of them that I'm fond of is—not that I want to do this, but somehow I find the evocative is—they have a little room where they live, monastic cell, I guess. But in the corner of the room they have the coffin they can be buried in, and so they see, "No, that's where I'm going."

And recently I read a bit more about a green burial, and there's a green burial site in Berlin. Someone I know went there to see it, and they had—I said, "Oh, they had really beautiful—what are they called? You know, like when you put a sheet over someone who's dead—shroud—yeah, really beautiful shrouds." And that's a beautiful shroud. I thought, "What? Maybe I should get a beautiful shroud, the shroud that I'll get somehow buried or burned or something, and I'll hang it on my wall at the retreat center." I have a room, just kind of my room there. So in that room at the retreat center, when at the retreat because of cancer.

And Buddhist monastics also will do death contemplations, and sometimes they'll go to the morgue, sometimes they'll go to cemeteries, sometimes they'll go and watch open cremations of bodies, sometimes they'll go to an anatomy lab and cadavers in medical centres, just to kind of really face it. And so the ideas are to somehow contemplate this very central existential issue of death and look it right in the eye. And many people who have not devoted their life to that kind of lifestyle easily avoid it. Then, you know, we're busy, too busy for dying, you know, too busy for looking at it. And, you know, we're too involved in the world.

And it also can seem like a downer to contemplate it. But it's not meant to be a downer for people who do it. It's supposed to somehow have a very powerful effect, in a beneficial way, in people's lives.

In the modern era, a book that's been very popular is Stephen Levine's book *One Year to Live*. It's not exactly looking death in the same way with having your coffin in your room, or a skull next to your pillow when you're sleeping, or something. But still, it is somehow contemplating this essential fact that we all have, that we're going to die. And what is that? What light does that cast on our life? How do we reflect on our life? How do we think about it? What's important? Priorities. And so there's a lot of it. I'll say more about the benefits of this contemplation of death, but it's a very common thing to do in this particular text that I'm teaching these days about the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, discourse on the four foundations of mindfulness.

There's a series of nine contemplations on the decay of a corpse. And now I told my wife this at dinner. I think she asked what I was going to teach about. And my wife hikes a lot. She's a big hiker. She's about to leave to do the—for six months, to walk the Pacific Crest Trail from Mexico to Canada. So, no, she's a serious hiker. And now—and she said if you're a hiker, you see decaying corpses all the time. You know, the animals and insects and birds and all the stuff there. They're dead on the side of the trail, or in the trail, and they're in various states of decay. She said, "You see them all the time," and she said it looked completely like it was a natural, everyday kind of thing. That's what you see. This is what is there.

And then we went out down to our little garden, and we have a kind of strawberry bed, and that's been sitting over winter, and so we kind of need to clean it up. And what that means is that all the old, dead strawberry leaves, which are kind of matted underneath what's still alive, they need to be removed, because otherwise the strawberries will, when they grow, they'll sit on those matted, rotting leaves and rot themselves. So we started pulling out the old, rotted, you know, dead leaves, and she said, "You see here too, is it? Do you know decaying corpses, now strawberry plants?" So she kind of put it all in the same category as human decay, and then, you know, it's all a natural part of a natural world.

One of the most famous Buddhist monks, teachers in the twentieth century, was named Buddhādāsa, and he lived much of his life kind of outdoors. And he had a house, a tiny little place. He lived in the monastery, but he, you know, mostly had a table outside and chairs outside, and he would meet with his monks outside, and they wouldn't have indoor Dharma talks. They would have them outdoors in the woods, except it doesn't rain there a lot. So they had at one place in the monastery, they had—it's very big. It's mostly like, you know, pillars with

a roof on it. Just all the sides were open, and I guess they went there. Sometimes if it was raining a lot, they could keep talks or meditate together or something, and hanging from the rafters were two skeletons. And one of them had a sign at the bottom hanging from the feet. It said, "Missed Thailand, 1932." I don't know. You know, mostly the men are laughing. So, you know, I told against the monastics who came in there to meditate and hear Dharma talks. You know, that was there. It was there definitely for some kind of teaching purpose. You know, you can imagine maybe what it is.

And his instructions for when he died would simply be put out in the forest. It was his last gift, so that the monastics, the people there, could come and meditate by the corpse and watch it over the days and weeks, watch it decay. That was something he thought would be beneficial for them to see this natural process that we are all part of, and to really face it, and look at it, and be with it. But certainly not to depress them, but to actually inspire their practice, to inspire their looking deeply at themselves. And he didn't get his wish because—this is the danger—if you become famous and revered, you don't get left alone in the forest to decay. So he had a huge—you know, the king came. I think it was a big event, and he had to have the full high church cremation and everything.

Then, in the ancient texts, suttas, the Buddha gave a number of reasons why people would contemplate death, and one of them was to not be too enamoured with the physical body. And there are a few people here and there who are a little bit enamoured—maybe not their own body, but other bodies. And so that can kind of put a different perspective on things for some people. And I usually consider it to be a kind of an emergency medicine for certain lustful type people is to contemplate corpses. So enough. If you are that kind of person, maybe it's good medicine. The reason is that it is meant to help overcome a particular kind of conceit. And so anything that overcomes conceit, when we're too wrapped up in ourselves, caught up in ourselves, we somehow think we're special, or a lot of attachment to the "I, me, myself" that goes on and causes a lot of suffering for human beings. And more, maybe more important, that causes suffering, it keeps us from being free. And freedom is one of the great things—to really experience freedom.

And so the particular conceit that was emphasized for this contemplation of death is a cause, is kind of a very innocent conceit cause. Usually we think of conceit in Buddhism as "I'm worse than others, I'm better than others, or I am equal to others," which has got a—asking in English. Usually conceit means you're better than everyone else. But in Buddhism, thinking you're worse than others is also a kind of conceit. That's a kind of way of getting attached to who you are. And then the idea that you're equal to others—this is United States after all—

and you're not even supposed to see yourself as being equal—that's a conceit, too. So what's left? What's left is you don't compare yourself with anyone, and that's where there's freedom to be found.

But the conceit that is not that kind, the conceit, is a conceit of "ness," and that's a pretty basic, pretty central conceit, you know, or idea. People don't think of this conceit, but there can be a very strong, maybe intuitive or felt sense of just the "ness" of my being. And I remember once I was visiting a friend of mine, and his daughter was just beginning to talk a little. She had some words for them, and I pointed to her father, and said, "Who's that?" "Daddy." "Who's that?" "Mamma." And then I pointed to her, "Who's that?" And she said, "I am." And so I said, "Oh no, who's that?" And she said, "I am." And I was slow to learn. So I asked a third time, "Who's that?" And she stood up straight and stood up tall, kind of, and looked at me and said, "I am." I thought it was pretty cool. It was pretty wonderful, you know. I felt bad about myself, you know, giving her a name, and to limit her and, you know, put her into a box of, you know, and a whole, you know, just enough just to be right. But anyway, as wonderful as that is, and we wish it all on you, for all of you to have that, it can be a very deep attachment, clinging to even that sense of "am-ness." It can seem pretty ultimate, pretty wonderful, pretty essential, pretty universal, pretty something. But there can be a subtle—and subtle doesn't mean minor—subtle attachment to even that sense of "am-ness" that we hold on to. It's important. And Buddhism, the ultimate freedom, the freedom of Buddhism, goes beyond even that sense of "I" or "am-ness." And so the contemplation of death is somehow supposed to do that.

The other reason for the contemplation of death sometimes is—especially certain forms of death meditations in Buddhism—is to develop concentration, to get concentrated. And one other purpose of concentration, then, is to have insight. And the purpose of insight is to help us let go of our clinging, our attachment in some deep way. And so this death contemplation, in this text I'm going to read you, I think of it as a guide to meditation, and it's presented kind of as if it's a reflection or a visualization. I think it probably works best if a person can visualize what's being described and think of it as a journey, and you follow and follow the journey along. You're pulled along both to get concentrated, but also it's a journey from something that's more complicated to something more simple. And that's one of the classic ways that Buddhist meditation unfolds. We go from the complicated life of urban things, all these things, and our mind gets quieter and quieter, and our perceptions, what we think about, gets simpler and simpler and simpler. And the more peaceful we get, the more simple our concerns are, and the more simple is our perceptions of what's going on.

You know, there was a car that just went by, and why? I wonder what car that was. That was a nice sound. I needn't have a nice-sounding tiny car. My mind is not very quiet if I'm having those thoughts. But if I just go, "Oh, that was a car," my mind is more peaceful, right? But if my mind goes, "just gone," hear the sound, and kind of vibrates inside, that's kind of more peaceful, so that your mind goes more simple. Not making stories about things any more. It's not bringing in the past and future. And so this journey is simple, simple.

And then, in some places, the description is almost—it is like the mind is like a cord, a rope, and maybe the rope is stretched taut somehow, and the weather, the wind, and the rain, and everything, sun beats down on this rope, and slowly it begins to wear away. And as it gets thinner, it wears away, gets thinner and thinner and thinner and thinner, until at some point there's just a little tensile thread holding it together. And then at some point that thread goes, and the rope is free. The rope breaks off, and so the same way with the mind, that the mind can be taut and tense from our concerns, our attachments, our fears, our desires, our lusts, and all kinds of things, our preoccupations. And that cord, that used to be a cord, can be not only strong and tough, it can be all knotted up. In fact, the Buddha used the word "knot" to describe some of the attachments that we have in our mind. But as the mind gets as quiet as—Journey to a Quieter, Stiller Mind—the knots untangle, and the cord, the rope in the mind, the mind itself kind of gets thinner and thinner. Thinking gets thinner and thinner and thinner, and thinking becomes less and less solid, and our concerns become less and less substantial. When things get thinner and thinner and thinner as the mind gets quieter and quieter and quieter, at some point, the equivalent of the rope breaking happens to the mind. Now, maybe that's not a nice image, but it's a beautiful thing, because then the shackles, what ties the mind down, has been—if minds be freed from that. So this is a kind of a journey of that, looking at using the contemplation of a corpse as a visualization or as a reflection.

And I imagine that—I've never really done this as a meditation practice. I'm talking about something that I just assume that people do that. If people would do this over and over again as a meditation practice, and memorize it, and be able to kind of really get in the flow of it. And the more we do it, the more concentrated we become. It's more absorbed in the practice. And then this idea, this journey becomes more and more easy to do. The mind kind of follows the path over and over again, and then comes to the place where just things just disappear. So—and the last thing I'd like to say, kind of repeating a little bit, how much this is a natural process that we don't see in our society.

Bob Stahl, who is a teacher in Santa Cruz, a teacher there, he sent me an email this week, just a couple of days ago, saying, "My wife and I, we just went to this new green burial site in

Half Moon Bay,” and it's getting a little old, and it's a town of—there used to be a town called Purissima then. I don't know how much of it's a town any more, but there was a cemetery, and the coastal land trust somehow got ownership of that old, you know, hundred-year-old cemetery, and they're kind of redoing it to become a cemetery again, but a green burial site. And Bob Stahl was all excited and said, “My wife and I went there, and that's where we're going to go.” And he's really into it, because it's psychological. Or cremation turns out to be not so ecological, a lot of energy. And so he was delighted, right? Well, natural process. And then I thought about that, and I only go and be buried in the fog, you know. It might not be so nice. And now where would I like to be buried? And I wonder if I can get away with being buried at our retreat center. Wonder if that would work? We buried our cat there by his natural process of decay. We all go through it, and our society often doesn't see that, and, you know, it's kind of hidden from us.

We went to a—someone in our community died this last year, and so was asked to go to the crematorium, and they had a nice chapel in, you know, people who were going to do some memorial service for the person who's died, and the man was in his cardboard coffin on a kind of altar or something, and we did a little memorial service. And what was a little unusual for the people who worked there, crematorium it was, we all wanted to go back. And as the body was put into the oven—and I'm telling you the story was that—so we all piled into the back, and then the chapel was kind of nice. But as you go through two little doors and get into the back room, it just looks like a dingy, industrial, kind of crowded—I don't know—boiler room. You know, it was nothing. You know, it's like, well, you think that. What I mean, but what I told me is it's very rare that anybody wants to be there for that. And as—but, you know, that we wanted to be there and be the whole time, and the spouse who has long wanted me to push the button to start the fire. So this idea of really being there and that kind of experience, and facing it, and being present for it, is very touching, and I think very meaningful for some people, and it's a natural process that people die all the time.

I was kind of amused. I kind of like this. Maybe I have a weird humour or something, but—or came in talking too much today. I'm just going off in all the little ideas that come up. Not avoiding the text, but I feel kind of—I feel kind of cosy or I feel kind of tender. And so my mind's kind of following these tender memories and ideas that come up. So I hope—it's OK with you.

So there was some parody of human life that I read, and the parody was about people who say that in a birth, you know, the baby was born. It was a miracle. Our babies were born. It was a miracle for sure, you know. It's a miracle. Yes, it's a miracle. And it happens, you know,

a few million times every day. You know, it's like such a completely natural and ordinary and normal process—birth and death, you know? And we make it this big thing, which maybe we should—I don't know—but it is still a normal thing and natural thing. And what happens when we relate to it that way? Does that shift our relationship, or what prevents us from seeing it that way? And what do we bring? What do we pile on? And what baggage or extra stuff do we pile on? These kinds of momentous events that shouldn't be happening, but they seem to happen anyway. So to face this, to face death and dying and have a healthy relationship is certainly part of the value of contemplating death and dying.

And as I've said here a few times over the years, and recently, we train people here to be Buddhist chaplains, to offer spiritual care in hospitals and hospices in different settings. And every year we take the group to an anatomy lab to see the cadavers, because it's very important that people offering spiritual care in settings where people die, that they have some familiarity and comfort with death and dying, and so be able to go see it, and kind of look at their reactions and responses, and work with it, and kind of see the other side. So here this is. One way to do this is to do this contemplation, and I don't—if you want to, try to listen to it as a guided meditation, and somehow take it in with different cunning ears. Maybe trying to learn something.

So the Buddha here speaking to the bhikkhus—bhikkhus as a monastic, and again, it is a group of people who tend to want to address their existential issues head on:

Bhikkhus, 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. That bhikkhu compares this same body with the corpse: "This body of mine also is of the same nature. It will be like that corpse. It is not exempt from that fate."

Again, as though one were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals, or various kinds of worms. A bhikkhu compares his own body thus: "This body of mine is of the same nature. It will be like that corpse. 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. A bhikkhu compares the same body with this corpse: "This body, too, is of the same nature as the corpse. 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 fleshless skeleton smeared with blood held together with sinews, and then I'll abbreviate it. Then he goes on to the next one: a skeleton without flesh and blood held together with sinews. Or one were to see a corpse disconnected, the bones disconnected, scattered in all directions. Here a hand bone, there a foot bone, here a shin bone, there a thigh bone, here a hip bone, there a backbone, there a rib bone, there a breastbone, here an arm bone, there a shoulder bone, here a neck bone, there a jawbone, here a tooth, there a skull. So too, a bhikkhu compares the same body with that: "This body, too, of mine, 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, bones bleached white, the colour of shells, and thence one were to see the bones heaped up more than a year old, or then one were to see the bones rotted and crumbled to dust. A bhikkhu compares the same body with the corpse: "This body of mine, too, is of the same nature. It will be like that. It is not exempt from that fate. It, too, will blow away in the wind."

So this is offered in this text as a way of developing strong, concentrated mindfulness, that the ability to be really present and aware, and then to have this heightened awareness, which becomes the field or becomes the medium through which this simplification process can occur, where the mind gets simpler and simpler as it lets go of its preoccupations and thoughts. But the awareness is kind of like the medium in which that can occur. So you want to have this very strong, established mindfulness, awareness for this to occur. And for some people, the presence and even the contemplation of death is one way to, you know, to become present. And if I've done that for myself, there are times when I've been troubled by things, and at some point it felt like I was too attached to the whole phenomena that I was troubled by. It just didn't seem like a sucking kind of a loop that wasn't so useful. And so then I said, "I'm going to die." And in my mind's eye, I have a way in my mind's eye of kind of looking death right in the eye. And so I cleared death, you know? And so that kind of would clear things up. And then it was easier to kind of move on.

So what was I'd like for some of you to hear that? Because I'm very curious about you now. I offered you some ideas of how this is beneficial. But what was it like, and was anything beneficial of somehow going along that journey of those decaying corpses? And curious to hear from some of you. And it doesn't have to be big. It could be a small thing. Yet felt like a death accompanying life right here, right now, with some personal perception involved.

Looking into the future, said Sandy last part, I felt like there was some perception involved with it. And looking toward the future, your future, yes, years to really now, you're telling me. I thought that was the one who was examined? Someone else, please. Thank you, Bill. Yes, straight. I just have a very short story to tell the—close, closer. Yes, is it good now? Yes, oh, I was travelling in a historic town in Portugal some time ago and visited a very nice, gorgeous Catholic church. And next to it there was a somewhat large room that we were encouraged to visit full of skeletons. Yes, skeletons, skulls, bones of all sizes and shapes. But the most amazing thing was the plaque that was on top of everything. It said, of course, in Portuguese, but something like that: "We, the bones, were here for yours. We await." Hahahahaha. I thought that was kind of creepy. I didn't feel very comfortable at all.

I took my fourteen-year-old son to a church in Rome, where it was like that—it was a cellar. It was a big cellar, and all these bones. But they were—they were arranged artistically. It was beautiful. What you can do, what you can do with bones, if you're an artist, it's quite something. They were doing it for hundreds of years. So it kind of really was layers and layers and layers in shelves and shelves up to the top. That was amazing. So what is this meditation for in the run through? So I found it very relaxing, actually, and I was sort of visualizing, as you were talking, and towards the end of the meditation, just this strong sense of being part of nature. Very nice. Thank you, someone else. Yes, yes, I appreciated this because, in a way, I wanted to do this. And in the meditation, the fact that it was repeated, you know, you're looking at this idea, and then it's repeated again, and it's me, or you were—sort of helped bring it home. It also seemed that, yeah, by the end it was sort of like being—I don't know if it's Georgia O'Keeffe or what—just out on a desert with bones. It was quite beautiful. I mean, it seemed at that point not me so much. Nice. And that's kind of also the direction of the meditation practice. As you get simpler and simpler, it's not me any more. It's nature.

It's only been in the last two years that I have felt like my parents are starting to decay a bit, and I don't think about it a whole lot. I think mostly because I don't want—I don't want to. But this—your talk tonight and the meditation both have given me a little bit of a sense of humor about that, Ananda, and a grounding like, "Yeah, it's totally fine, Ananda. It's not really a big deal, like I can be really attached to it." So I want—you were saying about the miracle of life. I know, baby's born, somebody died, and that it's just—it's not just normal, as I get the wrong word, but it's commonplace. Yes, and that puts some ease with it. Appreciate it. I appreciate what you said very much. It was very significant, and I appreciate it. And I want to respond with lots of respect and seriousness, and what might sound like humour as well. Only the last couple years you realize your parents are decaying. You're no spring chicken. Hi, they were

really young when I had—yes, Ut. You're our—you away too, of slowing down, of decaying. And oh, fair enough. I think Bill started it. So it's—please now. No one's dare say anything. I appreciate hearing all this. I'd love to hear some more comments.

Well, I've reached the age when I'm starting to have a few health problems, and recently my brother—he told me that it was scaring him because he always thought of me as being invincible. And these experiences, you know, I'm the rock, and the rock is chipping away. He'll be worried if it wasn't—I know. But I thought I was invincible, too, and not—yeah, old age and death and decay and death are not mistakes. They're not mistakes, though, in Vin. And in simple change is invincible. Till—maybe we have time for one more. Someone would be so kind. I appreciate. Yes, Bill. I do love this *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, and I never tire of hearing that part of it that you read, and part of me knows, you know, I need to be reminded. Get used to the idea. No, big deal, but I'm pretty resistant. I think hearing stories doesn't— isn't going to help me let go so much. And what would I do? I've got all these books and articles and essays I want to write, and I've got to live long enough to finish them, and they're big, long, involved projects. And if I get them published, my name will be on them, and so forth, and so on. And I think if I could let go of all that, I'd be a lot more fearless. Now I do. I think they're good things to write—people would like them, find useful, I think. But they get in the way for me as far as writing goes. It's concerned. So I've—so when it comes to practice, I've got divided loyalties. I have divided loyalties. I've got my book and article projects, and then I've got the practice, and they aren't meshing so well. You said at the beginning that the stories are not going to do it for you, and you talked about, you know, yet maybe you should be more fierce. I think that if you want to do this process here, you're going to have to get serious until you're serious. As soon as I work about practice, okay.

So thank you. I hope it was as nice for you as it has been for me to be here with you and can talk about this. And so we'll continue next week in this text, and it gets much safer next week. Thank you all.