

Meditation on the Uncertainty of the Time of Death

This is a meditation on the second "root" or main point of the 9-point meditation on death: that the time of death is uncertain. The other two root points are: that death is inevitable, and that only spiritual practice helps at the time of death. These two roots are covered in separate meditations.

Preparation

Sit in a comfortable position, with your back straight, and let your body relax. Spend some time letting your mind settle down in the present moment; let go of thoughts of the past or the future. Make the decision to keep your mind focused on the meditation-topic for the duration of the meditation session.

Motivation

When your mind is calm and settled in the present, generate a positive motivation for doing the meditation. For example, you can think: "May this meditation help bring about greater peace and happiness for all beings," or: "May this meditation be a cause for me to become enlightened so that I can help all beings become free of suffering and become enlightened as well."

Body of the meditation

(As you contemplate the following points, bring in your own ideas and experiences, as well as stories you have heard or read, to illustrate each point. Try to get a feeling of each point. If at any time during the meditation you experience a strong, intuitive feeling of the point you are examining, stop thinking and hold the feeling with concentration as long as you can. When it fades or your mind gets distracted, return to the contemplation.)

By contemplating the inevitability of death (the first root), you come to accept that you are definitely going to die. But you might think that death is not going to happen for a long time. Why do you think this way? Is there any way you can know for sure when death will happen? Contemplate the following three points to get a sense of how the time of death is completely uncertain and unknown.

1. Human life-expectancy is uncertain

If human beings died at a specific age, say eighty-eight, we would have plenty of time and space to prepare for death. But there is no such certainty, and death catches most of us by surprise.

Life can end at any point: at birth, in childhood, in adolescence, at the age of twenty-two or thirty-five or fifty or ninety-four. Think of examples of people you know or have heard about who died before they reached the age you are now at...

Being young and healthy is no guarantee that a person will live a long time—children sometimes die before their parents. Healthy people can die before those who are suffering from a terminal illness such as cancer.... We can *hope* to live until we are seventy or eighty, but we cannot be certain of doing so. We cannot be certain that we will not die later today.

It is very difficult to feel convinced that death could happen at any moment. We tend to feel that since we have survived so far, our continuation is secure. But thousands of people die every day, and few of them expected to.

Generate a strong feeling of the complete uncertainty of your own time of death; how there is simply no guarantee that you have long to live.

2. There are many causes of death

There are many different ways that death can happen to people. Sometimes death happens due to external causes. These include natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods and volcanic eruptions, or accidents such as car- or plane-crashes. People can also be killed by other people—murderers or terrorists—or by dangerous animals or poisonous insects.

Death can also happen due to internal causes. There are hundreds of different diseases that can rob us of our health and lead to death. There are also cases of people who are not ill, but their bodies simply stop functioning and they suddenly die.

Even things which normally support life can become the cause of death. Food, for example, is something we need in order to stay alive, but it can sometimes lead to death, as when people overeat, or eat food that is contaminated. Medicine is another thing which normally supports life, but people sometimes die because they took the wrong medicine, or the wrong dose. Houses and apartments enable us to live comfortably, but they sometimes catch fire or collapse, killing the people inside.

Bring to mind cases of people you know or have heard about who have died, and think of how they died. Think that any of these things could happen to you as well.

3. The human body is very fragile

Our human body is very vulnerable; it can be injured or struck down by illness so easily. Within minutes it can change from being strong and active to being helplessly weak and full of pain.

Right now you might feel healthy, energetic and secure, but something as small as a virus or as insignificant as a thorn could become the cause of your death.

Think about this. Recall the times you have hurt or injured your body, and how easily it could happen again and even cause your death.

Your body will not last forever. In the course of your life you might manage to avoid illness and accidents, but the years will eventually overtake you—your body will degenerate, lose its beauty and vitality, and finally die.

By meditating on these three points, we will develop the determination to begin our practice of the spiritual path right now, as the future is so uncertain.

Dedication

Conclude the meditation with the optimistic thought that you have every possibility to make your life meaningful, beneficial and positive, and in this way you will be able to die with peace of mind. Remember the motivation you had at the beginning of the meditation and dedicate the merit of doing the meditation to that same purpose—for the benefit of all beings.