

The Nine-Point Meditation on Death

This is a slightly modified version of the "Death Awareness Meditation" found in How to Meditate—either version can be used. There are different ways to meditate on the nine points. One way is to meditate on all nine points in one session, another is to do one point per session, thus taking nine sessions to complete all the points. A third alternative is to spend one session on each of the three main points: the inevitability of death, the uncertainty of the time of death, and the fact that only spiritual practice can help at the time of death. You can do whichever way you wish.

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.)

A. The Inevitability of Death

We plan many activities and projects for the coming days, months and years. Although death is the only event that is *certain* to occur, we don't usually think about it or plan for it. Even if the thought of death does arise in our mind, we usually push it away quickly—we don't want to think about death. But it's important to think about and be prepared for it. Contemplate the following three points to get a sense of how death is definitely going to happen to you.

1. Everyone has to die

To generate an experience of death's inevitability, bring to mind people from the past: famous rulers and writers, musicians, philosophers, saints, scientists, criminals, and ordinary people. These people were once alive—they worked, thought and wrote; they loved and fought, enjoyed life and suffered. And finally they died.

Can you think of an example of someone who was born on this earth but who did not die?... No matter how wise, wealthy, powerful or popular a person may be, his or her life must come to an end. The same is true for all other living creatures. For all the advances in science and medicine, no one has found a cure for death, and no one ever will.

Now bring to mind people you know who have already died.... And think of the people you know who are still alive. Contemplate that each of these people will one day die. And so will you.

There are several billion people on the planet right now, but one hundred years from now, all of these people—with the exception of a few who are now very young — will be gone. You yourself will be dead. Try to experience this fact with your entire being.

2. Your lifespan is decreasing continuously

Time never stands still—it is continuously passing. Seconds become minutes, minutes become hours, hours become days, days become years, and as time is passing in this way, you are travelling closer and closer towards death. Imagine an hour-glass, with the sand running into the bottom. The time you have to live is like these grains of sand, continuously running out...Hold your awareness for a while on the experience of this uninterrupted flow of time carrying you to the end of your life.

Another way to get a sense of your life moving continuously towards death is to imagine being on a train which is always traveling at a steady speed— it never slows down or stops, and there is no way that you can get off. This train is continuously bringing you closer and closer to its destination: the end of your life. Try to really get a sense of this, and check what thoughts and feelings arise in your mind.

3. The amount of time you have for spiritual practice is very small

Since you are getting closer and closer to death all the time, what are you doing to prepare for it?...The best way to prepare for death is doing spiritual practice. This is because the only thing that continues after death is the mind, and spiritual practice is the only thing that truly benefits the mind, preparing it for death and the journey to the next life. But how much time do you actually devote to spiritual practice-- working on decreasing the negative aspects of the mind (such as anger and attachment) and developing the positive aspects of the mind (such as kindness and wisdom), and behaving in ways that are beneficial to others?

Calculate how you spend your time: In an average day, how many hours do you sleep? How many hours do you work? How many hours do you spend preparing food, eating and socializing? How much time do you spend feeling depressed, frustrated, bored, angry, resentful, jealous, lazy or critical? And

how much time do you spend consciously trying to improve your state of mind, or doing beneficial things such as helping others, or spiritual study or meditation?

Do these calculations honestly. Assess your life in this practical way to see clearly just how much of your time is spent doing things that truly benefit yourself and others, and that will be helpful for your mind at the time of death and in the next life.

By meditating on these first three points, you should be able to develop the determination to use your life wisely and mindfully.

B. The Uncertainty of the time of Death

By contemplating the first three points, 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.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. 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 second three points, we will develop the determination to begin our practice of the spiritual path right now, as the future is so uncertain.

C. The fact that only spiritual practice can help you at the time of death

No matter how much we have acquired or developed throughout our life—in terms of family and friends, wealth, power, travel experiences, and so on—none of it goes with us at death. Only our mind continues, carrying imprints of all that we have thought, felt, said and done. It is vital that when we die, we will have as many positive imprints—which will bring good experiences—

and as few negative imprints—which will bring suffering—on our mind as possible. Also, we should aim to die at peace with ourselves, feeling good about how we lived our life, and not leaving behind any unresolved conflicts with people.

The only things that will truly benefit us at the time of death are positive states of mind such as faith, non-attachment and calm acceptance of the changes that are taking place, loving-kindness, compassion, patience and wisdom. But in order to be able to have such states of mind at the time of death, we need to make ourselves familiar with them during the course of our life—and this is the essence of Dharma, or spiritual practice. Realizing this will give us the incentive and energy to start practicing Dharma now, and to practice as much as we can while we still have time.

You can experience a strong feeling of this reality by imagining yourself at the time of death, and contemplating the following three points.

7. Your loved ones cannot help

As you lie on your deathbed, or as the plane you are traveling in is about to crash, what kind of thoughts would come into your mind? Our strongest attachments are usually to our family and friends, so you would probably think of them, and feel a strong wish to be with them. But even if they were present with you at the time of death, would they be able to help you? Although they love you very much and do not want you to die, they cannot prevent this from happening. Most probably they will not know what to say or do that will give you peace-of-mind, and instead, their sadness and worry about the coming separation will affect you—stirring up the same emotions in your mind.

When we die, we go alone— no one, not even our closest, dearest loved one, can accompany us. And being unable to accept this and let go of our attachment to our loved ones will cause our mind to be in turmoil and make it very difficult to have a peaceful death.

Recognize the attachment you have to your family and friends. See if you can realize that having strong attachment to people can be a hindrance to having a peaceful state of mind at the time of death, so it is better to work on decreasing this attachment and learning to let go.

8. Your possessions and enjoyments cannot help

Your mind will probably also think of your possessions and property, which occupy a great deal of your time while you are alive, and are a source of much pleasure and satisfaction. But can any of these things bring you comfort and peace at the time of death? Your wealth may be able to provide you with a private room in the hospital and the best medical care, but that is all it can do for you. It cannot stop death from happening, and when you die, you cannot take any of it with you—not even one cent or one article of clothing.

Not only will your possessions be unable to help you at the time of death, but your mind may be caught up in worries about them—who will get what, and whether or not they will take proper care of “your” things. So that will make it difficult to have a peaceful, detached state of mind as you are dying. Contemplate these points, and see if you can understand the importance of learning to be less dependent on and attached to material things.

9. Your own body cannot help

Your body has been your constant companion since birth. You know it more intimately than anything or anyone else. You have cared for it and protected it, worried about it, kept it comfortable and healthy, fed it and cleaned it, experienced all kind of pleasure and pain with it. It has been your most treasured possession.

But now you are dying and that means you will be separated from it. It will become weak and eventually quite useless: your mind will separate from it and it will be taken to the cemetery or crematorium. What good can it possibly do you now?

Contemplate the strong sense of dependence and attachment you have to your own body, and how it cannot benefit you in any way at death. Fear of pain and regret about leaving it will only compound your suffering.

By meditating on the final three points, we should come to realize how important it is to work on reducing our attachment to the things of this life, such as family and friends, possessions, and our body. We should also realize how important it is to take care of our mind, as that is the only thing that will continue to the next life. “Taking care of the mind” means working on decreasing the negative states of mind such as anger and attachment, and cultivating positive qualities such as faith, loving-kindness, compassion, patience, and wisdom.

Furthermore, as the imprints of our actions in this life will also go with our mind to the next one, and will determine the kind of rebirth and experiences we will have, it is essential to try our best to refrain from negative actions, and create positive actions as much as possible during our life.

It is possible that you will feel fear or sadness when doing this meditation. In one sense, that is good—it shows that you have taken the ideas seriously and have contemplated them well. Also, it is important to get in touch with how you do feel about death so that you can work on being prepared for it when it happens. However, the purpose of the meditation is not to make you frightened. Just being afraid of death is not helpful. What *is* helpful is to be afraid of dying with a negative state of mind and a lot of imprints on your mind from negative actions you have done in your life. You need to get a strong sense of how terrible it would be to die like that, so that you live your life wisely, doing as many positive, beneficial things as possible.

Also, fear arises because of clinging to the idea of a permanent self—there is no such thing, so this is a delusion that just makes us suffer. If we keep death in mind in an easy, open way, this clinging will gradually loosen, allowing us to be mindful and make every action positive and beneficial, for ourselves and others. And an awareness of death gives us enormous energy to not waste our life, but to live it as effectively as possible.

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.