

Life is Short

In an effort to engender the desire to practice, to move forward along the path, there are certain reflections you might engage in.

One is the reflection on suffering. When you contemplate the truth of your suffering, you become more inclined to do what you have to do to end it. Acknowledging your suffering, you respond with compassion, and out of compassion you make an effort to abandon the unskillful and develop the skillful.

Another important contemplation is the reflection on death. In making this reflection there are three basic truths you might reflect on:

- 1-You will die.
- 2-Life is short.
- 3-The time of death is uncertain.

When we reflect on the truth of death, we're disposed to act accordingly, to make the most of our lives, to practice the dharma in the service of ending suffering and finding true happiness. Death is the great motivator. It strengthens our resolve. It instigates a sense of urgency.

The Buddha encouraged his followers to remember that life is short and that they should make an effort to find true happiness while they had the chance. He used vivid similes to describe the brevity of life.

"Just as a dewdrop on the tip of a blade of grass quickly vanishes with the rising of the sun and does not stay long, in the same way, brahmans, the life of human beings is like a dewdrop....

"Just as when the rain-devas send rain in fat drops, and a bubble on the water quickly vanishes and does not stay long, in the same way, brahmans, the life of human beings is like a water bubble....

"Just as a line drawn in the water with a stick quickly vanishes and does not stay long, in the same way, brahmans, the life of human beings is like a line drawn in the water with a stick...." (AN 7.70)

The fact is, you've got just a brief amount of time in which to live, in which to find the happiness that's available to a human being. You don't want to squander the little time you've got.

You might think about it like this:

You take a trip to Paris. You've never been there, but you've always wanted to go. Finally you're there. You're going to be there for a week. You don't want to spend your time in your hotel room, reading magazines. You want to experience the city, see the sights. You want to go to the Eiffel Tower and the Louvre. You want to stroll along the Seine. You want to make the most of the limited time you have.

That's how it is with this life. It's just a brief stay. You're not going to be here very long. You've got just this small piece of time. You want to make the most of it.

It's easier, perhaps, to ignore the truth. It's easier, perhaps, to turn away from the fact that death is unavoidable. It's easier to forget. For this reason, we need to make it a practice to

remember. The Buddha said that he reflected on the truth of death with every breath. Clearly, that's way too much for us; we don't have quite as much equanimity as the Buddha. The reflection on death must be practiced skillfully. We need to reflect with steadiness, strength. In other words, we need equanimity. Developed in equanimity, we're less likely to get knocked sideways by the reflection.

I generally recommend that students reflect on the truth of death once every day. There will be days, of course, when you won't have the necessary equanimity; if you don't feel up to it, you should bypass the reflection. You shouldn't reflect if you're not able to do it skillfully.

The reflection shouldn't take longer than a few moments. I usually suggest that students reflect for no more than ten seconds. Five seconds is probably long enough.

And in fact, you don't need to reflect for longer than that. If you reflect for a few moments every day, or almost every day, on an ongoing basis, you'll benefit significantly.

In reflecting, you're asked to remind yourself of the truth of death. The Buddha offers the basic reflection:

"I am subject to death. Death is unavoidable."

Other possible reflections include:

"Life is short. Shorter than I think."

"The time of death is uncertain."

"The days and nights are passing endlessly. How am I spending my time?"

As always, the reflection will be most effective if you find your own words, your own way of saying it, your own way of directing yourself toward an understanding of the truth.

Reflecting, keep your attention in the body. Connect to a felt sense of the truth, the truth of death, the truth of your own death. Feel the truth.

If you like, you can try it now.

Put your mind on your breath. Let the breath be easeful, pleasant.

Keeping your attention in your body, reflect on the truth of death.

Assert directed thought.

“I am subject to death. Death is unavoidable.”

Allow the reflection to pervade your body, move through your body. Let it touch in to your heart.

Apprehend a felt sense of the truth..

After five or ten seconds, put the reflection to the side. Focus on your breath. Feel the easeful breath.

Some people protest when they're advised to reflect on the truth of death. They complain that it's a morbid, gloomy practice. But the reflection on death isn't meant to promote gloominess. To the contrary, it's meant to guide us toward the end of suffering. The reflection, when practiced skillfully, opens us to the truth. It motivates us to practice the dharma. It promotes a sense of urgency. It reminds us to have a sense of our true priorities and to stick to them. It points us in the right direction. It leads us toward a greater happiness.

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