9 CONTEMPLATIONS OF ATISHA

The Inevitability of Death
1. Everyone has to die
2. Our lifespan is decreasing continuously
3. The amount of time spent in our life to develop the mind is very small

The Uncertainty of the Time of Death
4. Human life expectancy is uncertain
5. There are many causes of death
6. The human body is so fragile

Only Insight into Dharma can Help at the Time of Death
7. Our possessions & enjoyments cannot help
8. Our loved ones cannot help
9. Our own body cannot help

MARANA-SATI: DEATH AWARENESS PRACTICE OUTLINE

By Larry Rosenberg

Many of you who have been practicing vipassana may never have done a contemplation of this sort, because the emphasis in our practice is on the direct perception of what's happening in the moment. When you're practicing vipassana, you're not encouraged to think. But in death awareness practice you learn that there's a way of using the thought process itself very creatively so that it's an aid to the development of wisdom.

It's helpful to begin by becoming mindful of the breath or making use of some other technique that enables you to become calm. Sometimes keeping a light connection with the breath throughout the practice can soothe and steady the mind and actually deepen the reflection.

Take perhaps twenty minutes a day. Don't overdo it, you'll know what feels right. First find your own way to calm the mind. Select one of the possible contemplations and go into it in some depth. When you are finished with your contemplation, skim over the others on the outline so that, in some way, they become part of what you learn that day.

Here's a possible scenario: You take up a thought, let's say, "Everyone has to die." Then you have license to bring that thought inside, to reflect on it, to contemplate on it. This is where the practice can become very creative. Each person can do it in their own unique way. You can, in a sense, have a conversation with yourself: you can speculate, you can draw on the richness of your
own life experience, you can call up specific images, objects, people. You can visualize yourself dying, or people you know who are already dead; you might visualize your family plot at the cemetery or perhaps your own skeleton. The degree of samadhi, the degree of calm and concentration that you bring to the contemplation has a great deal to do with the quality of it and the fruit you receive from it. If you have a strong samadhi practice already, you will pick up a thought and the thought will become very rich. You can question, reflect and play with it.

Now, while you're doing this reflection, from time to time, a certain feeling will come up. For example, if you are contemplating the inevitability of death, as you take the thought inside and go deeper and deeper with it, a kind of intuition may arise. Ideally it's not in words—it's a feeling or a strong conviction that impresses itself upon the heart. Suddenly you feel, "Wow!" You already know this. At that point, drop all of the creative thinking, analysis, investigation and reflection, and just bring your samadhi to bear on the feeling. Mix whatever degree of concentration or stability of mind you have with the feeling. Soak it in the calm. This makes it more alive, gives it more depth, more fullness, more meaning. Then be with it. That's your object of contemplation.

Now you are doing a kind of one-pointed meditation. Be with it as long as you can. In the beginning this may be just a few seconds. It may fade, but don't struggle to retrieve it. At this point you might go back to the more creative aspect of the practice or you might take a break. You can just drop it and end the session! If you wish to continue, you might initially choose to return to the breath or go back to some other practice which calms the mind. You can go back and forth like this for a while—samadhi and vipassana, samadhi and vipassana.

As you continue to do this practice, you may find that the creative process takes you somewhere you don't find in this systematic arrangement. Or you may find that a particular reflection really is a key for you. If so, you can focus on that.

We can't control what's going to come up. It's possible that at the end of a session you may feel depressed or discouraged. Or at some point during a session you may start to feel sweaty or clammy or jittery. Look at it, and if you want to stop, stop. If you find that you are particularly shaken, perhaps you shouldn't do this contemplation, or wait until some other time. You know best.

Remember, in death awareness practice, as in vipassana, we are trying to understand impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and no-self, only now it's through a kind of disciplined use of thought. It's a focused use of thought so that thought becomes an ally, rather than an enemy, of dharma.

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