

Mindfulness on Death

Mindfulness of death in AN (A6:19–20, A8:73–74).

A6:19 Mindfulness of Death (1)

On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Nādika in the brick hall. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus: [304] “Bhikkhus!”

“Venerable sir!” those bhikkhus replied. The Blessed One said this:

“Bhikkhus, mindfulness of death, when developed and cultivated, is of great fruit and benefit, culminating in the deathless, having the deathless as its consummation.¹²⁸³ But do you, bhikkhus, develop mindfulness of death?”

(1) When this was said, one bhikkhu said to the Blessed One: “Bhante, I develop mindfulness of death.”

“But how, bhikkhu, do you develop mindfulness of death?”

“Here, Bhante, I think thus: ‘May I live just a night and a day so that I may attend to the Blessed One’s teaching.¹²⁸⁴ I could then accomplish much!’¹²⁸⁵ It is in this way that I develop mindfulness of death.”

(2) Another bhikkhu said to the Blessed One: “I too, Bhante, develop mindfulness of death.”

“But how, bhikkhu, do you develop mindfulness of death?”

“Here, Bhante, I think: ‘May I live just a day so that I may attend to the Blessed One’s teaching. I could then accomplish much!’ It is in this way that I develop mindfulness of death.”

(3) Still another bhikkhu said to the Blessed One: “I too, Bhante, develop mindfulness of death.”

“But how, bhikkhu, do you develop mindfulness of death?”

“Here, Bhante, I think: ‘May I live just the length of time it takes to eat a single alms meal¹²⁸⁶ so that I may attend to the Blessed One’s teaching. I could then accomplish much!’ It is in this way that I develop mindfulness of death.”

(4) Still another bhikkhu said to the Blessed One: “I too, Bhante, develop mindfulness of death.”

“But how, bhikkhu, do you develop mindfulness of death?”

“Here, Bhante, I think: ‘May I live just the length of time it takes to chew and swallow four or five mouthfuls of food so that I may attend to the Blessed One’s teaching. [305] I could then accomplish much!’ It is in this way that I develop mindfulness of death.”

(5) Still another bhikkhu said to the Blessed One: “I too, Bhante, develop mindfulness of death.”

“But how, bhikkhu, do you develop mindfulness of death?”

“Here, Bhante, I think: ‘May I live just the length of time it takes to chew and swallow a single mouthful of food so that I may attend to the Blessed One’s teaching. I could then accomplish much!’ It is in this way that I develop mindfulness of death.”

(6) Still another bhikkhu said to the Blessed One: “I too, Bhante, develop mindfulness of death.”

“But how, bhikkhu, do you develop mindfulness of death?”

“Here, Bhante, I think: ‘May I live just the length of time it takes to breathe out after breathing in, or to breathe in after breathing out, so that I may attend to the Blessed One’s teaching. I could then accomplish much!’ It is in this way that I develop mindfulness of death.”

When this was said, the Blessed One said to those bhikkhus: “Bhikkhus, (1) the bhikkhu who develops mindfulness of death thus: ‘May I live just a night and a day so that I may attend to the Blessed One’s teaching. I could then accomplish much!’; and (2) the one who develops mindfulness of death thus: ‘May I live just a day so that I may attend to the Blessed One’s teaching. I could then accomplish much!’; and (3) the one who develops mindfulness of death thus: ‘May I live just the length of time it takes to eat a single alms meal so that I may attend to the Blessed One’s teaching. I could then accomplish much!’; and (4) the one who develops mindfulness of death thus: ‘May I live just the length of time it takes to chew and swallow four or five mouthfuls of food so that I may attend to the Blessed One’s teaching. I could then accomplish much!’: [306] these are called bhikkhus who dwell heedlessly. They develop mindfulness of death sluggishly for the destruction of the taints.

“But (5) the bhikkhu who develops mindfulness of death thus: ‘May I live just the length of time it takes to chew and swallow a single mouthful of food so that I may attend to the Blessed One’s teaching. I could then accomplish much!’; and (6) the one who develops mindfulness of death thus: ‘May I live just the length of time it takes to breathe out after breathing in, or to breathe in after breathing out, so that I may attend to the Blessed One’s teaching. I could then accomplish much!’: these are called bhikkhus who dwell heedfully. They develop mindfulness of death keenly for the destruction of the taints.

“Therefore, bhikkhus, you should train yourselves thus: ‘We will dwell heedfully. We will develop mindfulness of death keenly for the destruction of the taints.’ Thus should you train yourselves.”

Endnotes

[1283](#) It is interesting to note that mindfulness of death culminates in the deathless.

[1284](#) Mp explains the opening exclamation, *aho vata*, as an indeclinable expressive of longing (*patthanatthe nipāto*). Brahmāli rejects Mp’s interpretation and regards the sentence as an emphatic statement of fact, which he renders: “Indeed, I may live just a night and a day; I should attend to the Blessed One’s teaching.” The Chinese parallel, EĀ 40.8 (T II 741c26–742b2), is in substantial agreement with Mp. Thus the first monk to speak (at T II 742a2–3) says: “When I contemplate death, I wish to go on living for seven days [and] contemplate the seven factors of enlightenment. This would be very beneficial [to me] in regard to the Tathāgata’s teaching [and] after death I will have no regrets” (T0125_.02.0742a02-4: 思惟死想時意欲存七日思惟七覺意。於如來法中多所饒益死後無恨).

[1285](#) *Bahuṃ vata me kataṃ assa*. Mp: “I could accomplish much in my task with respect to the teaching” (*śāsane mama kiccaṃ bahu kataṃ assa*). Mp-ṭ: “I would accomplish much in my task as a monk, which would be beneficial to me.”

[1286](#) Mp-ṭ: “A single alms meal: a single alms meal able to sustain him for a single day.” The point of the Pāli locution *tadantaraṃ ... yadantaraṃ* is not that he wants to live long enough to eat a single meal, but that, aware of the uncertainty of death’s arrival, he wants to live for the length of time it takes to eat a single meal so that he can practice the Dhamma. In other words, if it takes twenty minutes to silently eat a meal, this is the length of time he hopes to live.

AN6:20 (10) Mindfulness of Death (2)

On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Nāḍika in the brick hall. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus:

“Bhikkhus, mindfulness of death, when developed and cultivated, is of great fruit and benefit, culminating in the deathless, having the deathless as its consummation. And how is this so?

“Here, bhikkhus, when day has receded and night has approached,¹ a bhikkhu reflects thus: ‘I could die on account of many causes. (1) A snake might bite me, or a scorpion or centipede might sting me, and I might die; that would be an obstacle for me. (2) I might stumble and fall down, or (3) my food might disagree with me, or (4) my bile [307] might become agitated, or (5) my phlegm might become agitated, or (6) sharp winds in me might become agitated, and I might die; that would be an obstacle for me.’

“This bhikkhu should reflect thus: ‘Do I have any bad unwholesome qualities that have not been abandoned, which might become an obstacle for me if I were to die tonight?’ If, upon review, the bhikkhu knows: ‘I have bad unwholesome qualities that have not been abandoned, which might become an obstacle for me if I were to die tonight,’ then he should put forth extraordinary desire, effort, zeal, enthusiasm, indefatigability, mindfulness, and clear comprehension to abandon those bad unwholesome qualities. Just as one whose clothes or head had caught fire would put forth extraordinary desire, effort, zeal, enthusiasm, indefatigability, mindfulness, and clear comprehension to extinguish [the fire on] his clothes or head, so that bhikkhu should put forth extraordinary desire, effort, zeal, enthusiasm, indefatigability, mindfulness, and clear comprehension to abandon those bad unwholesome qualities.

“But if, upon review, the bhikkhu knows thus: ‘I do not have any bad unwholesome qualities that have not been abandoned, which might become an obstacle for me if I were to die tonight,’ then he should dwell in that same rapture and joy, training day and night in wholesome qualities.

“But when night has receded and day has approached, a bhikkhu reflects thus: ‘I could die on account of many causes. A snake might bite me ... or sharp winds might become agitated in me, and I might die; that would be an obstacle for me.’

“This bhikkhu should reflect thus: [308] ‘Do I have any bad unwholesome qualities that have not been abandoned which might become an obstacle for me if I were to die this day?’ If, upon review, the bhikkhu knows: ‘I have bad unwholesome qualities that I have not yet abandoned, which might become an obstacle for me if I were to die this day,’ then he should put forth extraordinary desire, effort, zeal, enthusiasm, indefatigability, mindfulness, and clear comprehension to abandon those bad unwholesome qualities. Just as one whose clothes or head had caught fire would put forth extraordinary desire, effort, zeal, enthusiasm, indefatigability, mindfulness, and clear comprehension to extinguish [the fire on] his clothes or head, so that bhikkhu should put forth extraordinary desire, effort, zeal, enthusiasm, indefatigability, mindfulness, and clear comprehension to abandon those bad unwholesome qualities.

“But if, upon review, the bhikkhu knows: ‘I do not have any bad unwholesome qualities that I have not yet abandoned, which might become an obstacle for me if I were to die this day,’ then he should dwell in that same rapture and joy, training day and night in wholesome

1 Rattiyā patihitāya. Patihita (or paṭihita) is not in PED; see SED sv prati-dhā. It is the past participle of patidahati, meaning “to commence, to begin, to approach,” which seems relevant here.

qualities.

“It is, bhikkhus, when mindfulness of death is developed and cultivated in this way that it is of great fruit and benefit, culminating in the deathless, having the deathless as its consummation.” [309]

AN8:73 (3) Mindfulness of Death (1)

(An expanded parallel of **6:19**. The additional sections are on living for half a day and for the time needed to eat half a meal.)

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“But (7) the bhikkhu who develops mindfulness of death thus: ‘May I live just the length of time it takes to chew and swallow a single mouthful of food so that I may attend to the Blessed One’s teaching. I could then accomplish much!’; and (8) the one who develops mindfulness of death thus: ‘May I live just the length of time it takes to breathe out after breathing in, or to breathe in after breathing out, so that I may attend to the Blessed One’s teaching. I could then accomplish much!’: these are called bhikkhus who dwell heedfully. They develop mindfulness of death keenly for the destruction of the taints.

“Therefore, bhikkhus, you should train yourselves thus: ‘We will dwell heedfully. We will develop mindfulness of death keenly for the destruction of the taints.’ Thus should you train yourselves.” [320]

AN8:74 (4) Mindfulness of Death (2)

(An expanded parallel of A6:20)

Suttas dealing with death in SN

S36.7 Gelañña Sutta

7 (7) The Sick Ward (1)

On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Vesālī in the Great Wood in the Hall with the Peaked Roof. Then, in the evening, the Blessed One emerged from seclusion and went to the sick ward,²³⁷ where he sat down in the appointed seat and addressed the bhikkhus thus: [211]

“Bhikkhus, a bhikkhu should await his time **mindful and clearly comprehending**. This is our instruction to you.

“And how, bhikkhus, is a bhikkhu mindful? Here, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu dwells contemplating the **body** in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having put away covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. He dwells contemplating **feelings** in feelings ... **mind** in mind ... **phenomena** in phenomena, ardent, clearly comprehending, mindful, having put away covetousness and displeasure in regard to the world. It is in such a way that a bhikkhu is mindful.

“And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu exercise clear comprehension? Here, bhikkhus, a

bhikkhu is one who **acts with clear comprehension** when going forward and returning; when looking ahead and looking aside; when drawing in and extending the limbs; when wearing his robes and carrying his outer robe and bowl; when eating, drinking, chewing his food, and tasting; when defecating and urinating; when walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep, waking up, speaking, and keeping silent. It is in such a way that a bhikkhu exercises clear comprehension.

“A bhikkhu should await his time mindful and clearly comprehending. This is our instruction to you.

“Bhikkhus, while a bhikkhu dwells thus, mindful and clearly comprehending, diligent, ardent, and resolute, if there arises in him **a pleasant feeling**, he understands thus: ‘There has arisen in me a pleasant feeling. Now that is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on this very body. But this body is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen. So when the pleasant feeling has arisen in dependence on a body that is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, how could it be permanent?’ He dwells contemplating impermanence in the body and in pleasant feeling, he dwells contemplating vanishing, contemplating fading away, contemplating cessation, contemplating relinquishment.²³⁸ As he dwells thus, [212] the underlying tendency to lust in regard to the body and in regard to pleasant feeling is abandoned by him.

“Bhikkhus, while a bhikkhu dwells thus, mindful and clearly comprehending, diligent, ardent, and resolute, if there arises in him **a painful feeling**, he understands thus: ‘There has arisen in me a painful feeling. Now that is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on just this body. But this body is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen. So when the painful feeling has arisen in dependence on a body that is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, how could it be permanent?’ He dwells contemplating impermanence in the body and in painful feeling, he dwells contemplating vanishing, contemplating fading away, contemplating cessation, contemplating relinquishment. As he dwells thus, the underlying tendency to aversion in regard to the body and in regard to painful feeling is abandoned by him.

“Bhikkhus, while a bhikkhu dwells thus, mindful and clearly comprehending, diligent, ardent, and resolute, if there arises in him a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he understands thus: ‘There has arisen in me a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling. Now that is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on just this body. But this body is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen. So when the neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling has arisen in dependence on a body that is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, how could it be permanent?’ He dwells contemplating impermanence in the body and in neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he dwells contemplating vanishing, contemplating fading away, contemplating cessation, contemplating relinquishment. As he dwells thus, the underlying tendency to ignorance in regard to the body and in regard to neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling is abandoned by him. [213]

“If he feels a pleasant feeling,²³⁹ he understands: ‘It is impermanent’; he understands: ‘It is not held to’; he understands: ‘It is not delighted in.’ If he feels a painful feeling, he understands: ‘It is impermanent’; he understands: ‘It is not held to’; he understands: ‘It is not delighted in.’ If he feels a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he understands: ‘It is impermanent’; he understands: ‘It is not held to’; he understands: ‘It is not delighted in.’

“If he feels a pleasant feeling, he feels it detached; if he feels a painful feeling, he feels it detached; if he feels a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he feels it detached.

“When he feels a feeling terminating with the body, he understands: ‘I feel a feeling terminating with the body.’ When he feels a feeling terminating with life, he understands: ‘I feel a feeling terminating with life.’ He understands: ‘With the breakup of the body, following the exhaustion of life, all that is felt, not being delighted in, will become cool right here.’

“Just as, bhikkhus, an oil lamp burns in dependence on the oil and the wick, and with the exhaustion of the oil and the wick it is extinguished through lack of fuel, so too, bhikkhus, when a bhikkhu feels a feeling terminating with the body ... terminating with life ... He understands: ‘With the breakup of the body, following the exhaustion of life, all that is felt, not being delighted in, will become cool right here.’”

S36.8 The Sick Ward (2)

(As in preceding sutta down to the second injunction:) [214]

“A bhikkhu should await his time mindful and clearly comprehending. This is our instruction to you.

“Bhikkhus, while a bhikkhu dwells thus, mindful and clearly comprehending, diligent, ardent, and resolute, if there arises in him a pleasant feeling, he understands thus: ‘There has arisen in me a pleasant feeling. Now that is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on just this contact. But this contact is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen. So when the pleasant feeling has arisen in dependence on a contact that is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, how could it be permanent?’ He dwells contemplating impermanence in contact and in pleasant feeling, he dwells contemplating vanishing, contemplating fading away, contemplating cessation, contemplating relinquishment. As he dwells thus, the underlying tendency to lust in regard to contact and in regard to pleasant feeling is abandoned by him.

“Bhikkhus, while a bhikkhu dwells thus, mindful and clearly comprehending, diligent, ardent, and resolute, if there arises in him a painful feeling, he understands thus: ‘There has arisen in me a painful feeling. Now that is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on just this contact. But this contact is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen. So when the painful feeling has arisen in dependence on a contact that is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, how could it be permanent?’ He dwells contemplating impermanence in contact and in painful feeling, he dwells contemplating vanishing, contemplating fading away, contemplating cessation, contemplating relinquishment. As he dwells thus, the underlying tendency to aversion in regard to contact and in regard to painful feeling is abandoned by him.

“Bhikkhus, while a bhikkhu dwells thus, mindful and clearly comprehending, diligent, ardent, and resolute, if there arises in him a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he understands thus: ‘There has arisen in me a neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling. Now that is dependent, not independent. Dependent on what? Dependent on just this contact. But

this contact is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen. So when the neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling has arisen in dependence on a contact that is impermanent, conditioned, dependently arisen, how could it be permanent?’ He dwells contemplating impermanence in contact and in neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, he dwells contemplating vanishing, contemplating fading away, contemplating cessation, contemplating relinquishment. As he dwells thus, the underlying tendency to ignorance in regard to contact and in regard to neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling is abandoned by him.

“If he feels a pleasant feeling ... (*all as in preceding sutta*) ... He understands: ‘With the breakup of the body, following the exhaustion of life, all that is felt, not being delighted in, will become cool right here.’”

[237](#) Spk: He went so that the bhikkhus, seeing the Tathāgata, the foremost person in the world, attending on the sick, would think, “We too should attend on the sick.” He also went to explain a meditation subject to those who needed one.

[238](#) Spk: At this point, what has been shown? This bhikkhu’s way of arrival [Spk-pt: the preliminary practice (*pubbabhāgapaṭipadā*) that is the cause for arrival at the noble path]. For the establishments of mindfulness are only preliminary, and in regard to clear comprehension the contemplations of impermanence, vanishing, and fading away are also only preliminary. These two—contemplation of cessation and of relinquishment—are mixed [Spk-pt: mundane and supramundane]. At this point, the time of the bhikkhu’s development (in meditation) is shown.

[239](#) From here to the end also at **12:51** (but with a different simile) and also at **22:88** and **54:8** (with the same simile).

S3.25 The Simile of the Mountain

At Sāvattthī. Then, in the middle of the day, King Pasenadi of Kosala approached the Blessed One.... <225> The Blessed One said to him as he was sitting to one side: “Now where are you coming from, great king, in the middle of the day?”

“Just now, venerable sir, I have been engaged in those affairs of kingship typical for head-anointed khattiya kings, who are intoxicated with the intoxication of sovereignty, who are obsessed by greed for sensual pleasures, who have attained stable control in their country, and who rule having conquered a great sphere of territory on earth.” [257](#)

“What do you think, great king? [101] Here, a man would come to you from the east, one who is trustworthy and reliable; having approached, he would tell you: ‘For sure, great king, you should know this: I am coming from the east, and there I saw a great mountain high as the clouds coming this way, crushing all living beings. Do whatever you think should be done, great king.’ Then a second man would come to you from the west ... Then a third man would come to you from the north ... <226> ... Then a fourth man would come to you from the south, one who is trustworthy and reliable; having approached, he would tell you: ‘For sure, great king, you should know this: I am coming from the south, and there I saw a great mountain high as the clouds coming this way, crushing all living beings. Do whatever

you think should be done, great king.’ If, great king, such a great peril should arise, such a terrible destruction of human life, the human state being so difficult to obtain, what should be done?”

“If, venerable sir, such a great peril should arise, such a terrible destruction of human life, the human state being so difficult to obtain, what else should be done but to live by the Dhamma, to live righteously, and to do wholesome and meritorious deeds?”²⁵⁸ “I inform you, great king, I announce to you, great king: aging and death are rolling in on you. When aging and death are rolling in on you, great king, what should be done?”

“As aging and death are rolling in on me, venerable sir, what else should be done but to live by the Dhamma, to live righteously, and to do wholesome and meritorious deeds? <227>

“There are, venerable sir, elephant battles [fought by] head-anointed khattiya kings, who are intoxicated with the intoxication of sovereignty, who are obsessed by greed for sensual pleasures, who have attained stable control in their country, and who rule having conquered a great sphere of territory on earth; but there is no place for those elephant battles, no scope for them, when aging and death are rolling in.²⁵⁹ There are, venerable sir, cavalry battles [fought by] head-anointed khattiya kings ... There are chariot battles ... infantry battles ... [102] but there is no place for those infantry battles, no scope for them, when aging and death are rolling in. In this royal court, venerable sir, there are counsellors who, when the enemies arrive, are capable of dividing them by subterfuge; but there is no place for those battles of subterfuge, no scope for them, when aging and death are rolling in. In this royal court, venerable sir, there exists abundant bullion and gold stored in vaults and depositories, and with such wealth we are capable of mollifying the enemies when they come; but there is no place for those battles of wealth, no scope for them, when aging and death are rolling in. As aging and death are rolling in on me, venerable sir, what else should be done but to live by the Dhamma, to live righteously, and to do wholesome and meritorious deeds?” <228>

“So it is, great king! So it is, great king! As aging and death are rolling in on you, what else should be done but to live by the Dhamma, to live righteously, and to do wholesome and meritorious deeds?”

This is what the Blessed One said. Having said this, the Fortunate One, the Teacher, further said this:

441 “Just as mountains of solid rock,
Massive, reaching to the sky,
Might draw together from all sides,
Crushing all in the four quarters—
So aging and death come
Rolling over living beings—
442 Khattiyas, brahmins, vessas, suddas,
Caṇḍālas and scavengers:
They spare none along the way
But come crushing everything.

443 “There’s no ground there for elephant troops,
For chariot troops and infantry.
One can’t defeat them by subterfuge,
Or buy them off by means of wealth. <229>

444 “Therefore a person of wisdom here,
Out of regard for his own good,
Steadfast, should settle faith
In the Buddha, Dhamma, and Saṅgha.

445 “When one conducts oneself by Dhamma
With body, speech, and mind,
They praise one here in the present life,
And after death one rejoices in heaven.” <230>

SN 44:9 - The Debating Hall

Then the wanderer Vacchagotta approached the Blessed One and exchanged greetings with him. When they had concluded their greetings and cordial talk, he sat down to one side and said to the Blessed One:

.....

“It is fitting for you to be perplexed, Vaccha, it is fitting for you to doubt. Doubt has arisen in you about a perplexing matter. I declare, Vaccha, rebirth for one with fuel, not for one without fuel. Just as a fire burns with fuel, but not without fuel, so, Vaccha, I declare rebirth for one with fuel, not for one without fuel.”³⁸¹

“Master Gotama, when a flame is flung by the wind and goes some distance, what does Master Gotama declare to be its fuel on that occasion?”

“When, Vaccha, a flame is flung by the wind and goes some distance, I declare that it is fuelled by the wind. For on that occasion the wind is its fuel.” [400]

“And, Master Gotama, when a being has laid down this body but has not yet been reborn in another body, what does Master Gotama declare to be its fuel on that occasion?”

“When, Vaccha, a being has laid down this body but has not yet been reborn in another body, I declare that it is fuelled by craving.³⁸² For on that occasion craving is its fuel.”

Sutta Nipata, SNP5.15. Mogharaja:

How does one view the world so as not to be seen by Death's king? *The Buddha: View the world, Mogharaja, as empty — always mindful to have removed any view about self.* This way one is above & beyond death. This is how one views the world so as not to be seen by Death's king.
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.5.15.than.html>

2 ³⁸² *Tam ahaṃ taṇhūpādānaṃ vadāmi.* The Buddha’s statement seems to imply that a temporal gap can intervene between the death moment and reconception. Since this contradicts Theravāda orthodoxy, Spk contends that at the death moment itself the being is said to be “not yet reborn” because the rebirth-consciousness has not yet arisen.