



Death and Dying from a Theravāda Buddhist Perspective

Christina Garbe

1. Why should we contemplate the subject of death?

Death is something we experience again and again, as small deaths of things that come to an end or as deaths of living beings around us. Our own death is also bound to come at some point.

Many people are emotionally involved in this topic, and it produces very unpleasant states of mind. Many people have difficulties in dealing with it. As a result, this subject is often pushed away. However, by suppressing it, the problems that this issue causes in one's mind are not solved. Since we will all die at some point, it makes sense to deal with this issue with awareness instead of pushing it away.

Death is a reality in life, both one's own death and that of other beings. When one suppresses things that are real, diffuse fears often arise. Therefore, it is much more helpful and satisfying being aware of this subject.

Since death is an important moment in the stream of consciousness of a being, it is all the more necessary to look at this subject consciously during life.

At the moment of death, one's state of mind determines the direction for the next existence. Being aware of this fact makes it more urgent to think about it while we are still alive or to practise accordingly in meditation. The more we become familiar with the fact that death will end our present life at a certain time, the more peacefully we will be able to die. A peaceful death means ending this life without attachment on the one hand and without fear on the other. Attachment refers to this life. It means not wanting to let go of what we are now or what we possess or the people we are connected to. Attachment is an unwholesome state of mind because it leads to unpleasant results. Fear relates to the direction of a new birth or whatever one imagines may come after this life. Fear is also an unwholesome state of mind. Fear is dominated by aversion.

Especially at the moment of death, unwholesome states of mind are particularly disastrous, for they lead to the lower realms of existence. In the lower realms of existence there is much suffering, and it is very difficult for beings in such a realm to allow wholesome states of mind to arise, let alone to come into contact with the *dhamma*, to understand and practise it. Even if one thinks one does not care where a new being appears or what happens after death, out of compassion for all beings and for peace in this universe, one should reflect that a being who, for example, is at the mercy of his aggressions or is overwhelmed by fears, does not contribute to harmonious, peaceful coexistence in this universe, nor to ultimate liberation from all unsatisfactoriness.

As long as one has not attained the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice, the fourth stage of awakening, arahatship, in this life, existence between birth and death will occur again and again.

To better understand our lives, it is helpful to look at death. Also, to understand existence in general, it is inevitable to think about death and dying.

If one wants to solve the problems of life, the problems of this world, one has to contemplate death, because without understanding death, one cannot understand life.

Since death can come very suddenly, one should not wait to familiarise oneself with it.

The more we familiarise ourselves with death, the more meaningfully we can use every moment of our lives. So becoming familiar with death enriches our lives.

If one represses death, one may have much attachment to this life. Attachment inevitably results in suffering because all things to which one is attached are impermanent. Attachment ignores this universal characteristic of impermanence and thus attachment leads to pain, frustration and suffering. No matter how hard we try to protect ourselves, be it with family, partnership and children or with material comforts, we cannot escape the law of impermanence.

If one represses the end of life, one cannot be truly happy because real happiness only arises when one sees things as they really are. Seeing things as they really are is the clear knowledge of impermanence experienced again and again.

Through contemplation of one's own death and that of one's fellow human beings, attachments to family and possessions are diminished and one can live more freely. Entanglements and confusions can be more easily resolved, and one learns to be more and more present in every moment.

2. Birth causes Death

The most certain thing that will happen in our lives is death. Death has already come into being with conception, for no living being can escape death.

As soon as a living being is conceived, it is certain that it will die at some point. This natural law, which constitutes every kind of existence, always applies. There is no exception.

So it is also certain for all of us that we will die because we are all born.

With death in the conventional sense, that means when a living being departs from a life, we encounter impermanence. This is impermanence in the conventional sense.

In the Buddha's teachings, two views are distinguished on the path to liberation from all unsatisfactoriness. One deals with ultimate realities. These realities are all impermanent from moment to moment, but they arise again and again as long as causes for them exist. Once the causes have run their course, they disappear finally.

The other view deals with appearances in the conventional sense.

Death in the ordinary sense is also impermanence because a life comes to an end, a being disappears. This impermanence, however, is not impermanence in the ultimate sense, which must be understood in order to overcome any kind of unsatisfactoriness.

But dealing with this kind of conventional impermanence, as represented by death, is supportive for understanding the ultimate impermanence.

Birth in the conventional sense, namely as the event that a being comes into this world, is appearance in the conventional sense. This appearance in the conventional sense is followed by disappearance in the conventional sense. This disappearance of a being that has been born is called death.

3. Cause of Death

There is a direct or proximate cause of death and a fundamental cause of death.

The proximate cause is that by which death obviously occurs:

Disease, accident, failure of organs, murder.

This direct cause can only come into effect

- by the natural end of the life span,
- by the exhaustion of the life force, that is, by natural death at an advanced age due to the natural failure of the organs.
- By the expiring of the effect of the action which produced this life.
- One cause of two causes of our life as human beings is a meritorious, i.e. a very wholesome action. Death can also be caused by the exhaustion of this merit which brought about this existence.

The merit that brought about being human can be small or strong, so the life span in our human realm can vary from minutes to over a hundred years.

We find in the Buddha's teachings an essential, detailed description of the interaction of various factors that condition our lives. This description also includes birth and death.

The Buddha called this succession of factors 'dependant origination' (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), which includes the law of cause and effect. This succession of factors explains the arising and passing away of beings and their experiences in the cycle of existence.

We find in it the cause of both birth and death. In order to understand death, it is inevitable to deal with dependant origination. Dependant origination, a succession of 12 factors, begins with ignorance. Ignorance is the basic condition for death. If there would not be ignorance, there would be no birth and only because there is birth there can be death.

In summary, we can say that the Buddha has shown the causes of birth in conditional arising, and that death only comes about through birth, because without being born we cannot die.

So the cause of birth is also the fundamental cause of death. Since the cause must always precede the effect, the cause of birth must precede birth in the case of this present life. Thus, the actual cause of the death of this life lies before the birth of this life.

Birth comes about through two causes:

- One cause is craving for a particular form of existence. When craving occurs repeatedly, it is called attachment. Attachment can be so powerful that it causes an entire life of a being. Craving is what the Buddha called an unwholesome root. He called it a root because the corresponding results grow on it. Unwholesome means that the results are unpleasant and do not lead to healing. The root craving never occurs as the only root. It always occurs together with another root, which is ignorance. This craving combined with ignorance must occur in the thoughts of an unawakened being in order to bring forth a new being. These thoughts involve the craving for a certain kind of existence, for becoming. They can be repetitive thoughts, such as wanting to be a man, or wanting to be a woman, or wanting to be a cat, wanting to be a divine being (*deva*), etc.. These thoughts are the main cause for a new existence. However, other supporting causes come in to make these thoughts effective. The supporting causes are actions that have been performed in one life.

- The second cause of birth is a wholesome or unwholesome action. In our case as human beings, it is a wholesome action. It was a very powerful, wholesome action that was performed before this life and that has produced this human life between birth and death.

A wholesome action leads to birth in a happy realm of existence, an unwholesome one to birth in an unhappy realm of existence. The human realm is one of the fortunate realms, not because we only experience happiness here, but because this realm is particularly suitable for attaining awakening in the Buddhist sense. The human realm is so favourable for awakening because we can experience happiness and suffering and through this, through our direct experience, we can understand both profoundly. Through this profound understanding, experiences of suffering can be transformed into higher happiness.

4. The Dying Process

Understanding the dying process is very important for a happy next birth, unless complete awakening has been attained in this life. Understanding the dying process can be a strong motivation for practice in the present existence.

Dying (*maraṇam*) refers to death caused by birth. This can occur, as described above, in any form such as disease, accident, murder, etc. as a direct cause.

It can occur with the cessation of the effect of the fundamental cause, namely the life-causing kamma, which in the case of a human being is wholesome. Kamma here is always meant in the sense of cause, as a result producing action. More precisely, it is the intention with which an action is performed. If the intention is wholesome, pleasant results will follow; if the intention is unwholesome, unpleasant results will follow. If the intention is powerfully wholesome and with full awareness, the result will be equally powerful; if the intention is weakly wholesome and not clear in the mind, the result will also be weak.

Death can occur earlier due to other destructive kamma which is stronger than the life causing kamma and which ceases life.

For example, a being may have been born as a human being because he gave food to others out of compassion. This wholesome action may have been so powerful that it could lead to 90 years of life as a human being. However, if there is also strong unwholesome kamma in this person's stream of consciousness that needs to become effective, this unwholesome kamma can lead to an earlier death with corresponding unpleasant circumstances. An unwholesome action can, for example, be the killing of living beings.

Dying means that something disappears.

What actually disappears when we die?

Our existence consists of two parts, namely of body and mind. Mind includes all mental activities that go on uninterruptedly in life. These mental activities are an uninterrupted appearance of very brief moments of consciousness.

As long as we are alive, the two parts, body and mind, are closely connected and mutually dependant. Mind can only arise in human existence on a physical base.

The body remains behind when we die. But in that body, consciousness no longer arises. The body is no longer animated by the mind and is therefore called a corpse. All bodily, verbal and mental functions cease with death. The body heat disappears. The sense faculties decay. The body without mind begins to rot very soon after the moment of death, like all matter not animated by mind.

Thus the mind, which is composed of many short moments of consciousness and has animated this body for a lifetime, ends in the body.

As human beings, we have a mental life continuum (*bhavaṅga*)¹ conditioned by wholesome action. The following descriptions are based on experiences from the concentration of the fourth *jhāna*. We can also find such descriptions in the commentary literature² on the Pāḷicanon. The life continuum (*bhavaṅga*) consists of individual moments of consciousness, which are also called beautiful consciousness. It is called beautiful consciousness because it is accompanied by pleasant factors such as lightness, calmness, softness, smoothness, harmony and sometimes by wisdom. This life continuum always occurs in the gaps between two thoughts or cognitive processes for shorter periods. It also occurs during sleep, then for longer periods. It thus connects the active moments of consciousness with each other, so that consciousness arises without gaps during a life. The life continuum is a passive consciousness. It does not cause active thoughts because it always takes the same object during a life. Most people are not aware of this object because it can only be seen with deep concentration. Although it is not known, it shapes a person's inclinations by the frequency of its occurrence.

With death, the spiritual life continuum specific to the life in question ends, because then the effect of the cause due to which it arose is exhausted. It is always only the same life continuum for one life span between birth and death. In the next life a new mental life continuum becomes effective.

Thus death separates from this body and this particular consciousness life continuum. In the next life a mental life continuum of a different kind appears. This corresponds to the action that conditions the new life.

Dying shows itself in that manner that existence with this body and the corresponding life

1 The word *bhavaṅga* is composed of the two words *aṅga* and *bhava*, *aṅga* means factor or link, *bhava* means existence. It is the connecting link that maintains the continuity of the stream of consciousness during life until the moment of death.

It is also called the mind door (*manodvāra*), but it is not material in nature like the other doors (eye door etc.), it arises on the material heart base.

AN 1. 49 Luminous Consciousness I.

"Luminous, *Bhikkhus*, is this consciousness, but it is defiled by added defilements."

AN 1. 50

"Luminous, *bhikkhus*, is this consciousness when it is freed from added defilements."

According to the commentary, the Buddha is speaking here of the life continuum (*bhavaṅga*). The description luminous is to be understood metaphorically, for consciousness has no colour. However, the matter produced by the *bhavaṅga* moments of consciousness is luminous. One can see this if one looks into the physical heart with strong concentration. One sees there a radiant light, which on closer analysis consists of light-coloured particles (*kalāpā*). s. AN 1. 50

If many unwholesome moments of consciousness, rooted in craving, aversion and delusion, arise, this light is overshadowed by the matter they produce and one can only see a dark grey colour. see. AN 1. 49

2 In DN 28, the Buddha speaks of the uninterrupted stream of consciousness (*viññāṇasota*) in this world and the next, which the practitioner can experience with concentration. In the commentary literature, the term *bhavaṅga* is used. This *bhavaṅga* makes this stream of consciousness (*viññāṇasota*) an uninterrupted stream because it fills all the gaps between the cognitive processes. In dependant origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), this *bhavaṅga* consciousness is contained in the factor *viññāṇā*.

continuum in a realm of existence, such as for example the human realm, ceases. What remains, beyond this death, are the effects of our wholesome and unwholesome actions. Only through the attainment of ultimate awakening (arahatship), when all mental defilements are destroyed, there will be no rebirth anymore.

These conditions can be observed with deep concentration in one's own stream of consciousness. One then also sees through one's own experience that there is no such thing as a soul. There are moments of consciousness which arise and pass away. And as long as there are still mental impurities, that is, as long as they have not been overcome by the stages of awakening, mind moments arise again and again, the succession of which is called stream of consciousness.

Understanding the life continuum (*bhavaṅga*) through direct experience, through direct knowledge, in meditation, is not only important for understanding birth and death, but also for realizing the main goal of the Buddha's teachings, namely the knowledge of non-self. If one recognizes this life continuum (*bhavaṅga*) for what it is, namely individual moments of consciousness that arise and pass away, one knows from direct experience that behind the impermanent cognitive processes there is not any person who experiences the cognitive processes and their impermanence.

With strong concentration, with attainment of the *jhānā*, the mind is able to contemplate body and mind in the past. The Buddha himself practised in this way and also instructed his disciples to practise in this way. For example, in his second discourse, the discourse on the characteristics of non-self (SN 22.59), he instructed his disciples to observe body and mind according to eleven aspects (past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, ordinary or noble, far or near). Practising in this way, one can experience these things, birth and death, with direct experience in one's own stream of consciousness. These experiences are difficult to put into words because they are not connected with ordinary thinking. They give profound insight and penetrating understanding of birth and death. It is a direct seeing of what happens in these very, very short moments of each existence.

How this spiritual life continuum is produced:

The mental life continuum of this present human life is consciousness with the same accompanying mental factors and with the same object as that which appeared as consciousness directly before the death moment of the previous life.

The death moment itself of the past life, the very short, very last moment of life, is only one moment of consciousness, which is of the same kind as the life continuum of the past life. At the ultimate level, death (*cuti*) is this one last moment of consciousness.

The death moment of this, our present human life, will therefore be of the same kind and have the same object as the life continuum of this present life.

Before death consciousness occurs in a life, the life continuum occurs for a few moments, as between all cognitive processes. The last thought in a life, the last process of consciousness, that is, directly before this last occurrence of the life continuum, determines the life continuum for the next life. The birth consciousness, the life continuum and the death consciousness of the corresponding life are always of the same kind. These moments of consciousness all have the same object, namely that which was taken up by the mind in the preceding life immediately before death. That is why the last process of consciousness is so important and decisive for where a being finds birth. For our human existence, it is a consciousness resulting from wholesome action, because the action or thought immediately before death was a wholesome one.

This continuum of life brought about by wholesome kamma is very important for our life. Although it does not create new results, it has an influence on our existence. The quality or strength of the individual mental factors has an influence on our abilities and especially on our spiritual practice. Mental factors are specific mental potentials that accompany consciousness. Wisdom, for example, is a mental factor. Wisdom may or may not accompany this life continuum as a factor. Not all people have wisdom as a mental factor accompanying the life continuum. The strength of the wisdom faculty is related to the wisdom that was present in the last process of consciousness in the previous life. This strength, of course, does not come from somewhere, but is conditioned by the development of wisdom in the whole life, because at the moment of death, what one has

practised throughout life, or how one has thought and acted, comes into effect.

If the capacity for wisdom is strongly developed in the life continuum, access to spiritual practice and understanding of the *dhamma* is easier.

The mental factors of non-craving and non-aversion also occur in the life continuum. They are the opposite of craving up to greed and of aversion up to anger and hatred. The Buddha called the three mental factors wisdom, non-craving and non-aversion roots. He called them roots because, like in case of a plant, the corresponding fruits grow on them. These three roots are called wholesome roots. They bear pleasant fruits. So as human beings we all have this wholesome potential. We speak of two-rooted potential when only the two roots of non-craving and non-aversion are present and of three-rooted potential when the root of wisdom also accompanies the life continuum.

The wholesome action that brings about the future life continuum in the dying process can be performed or remembered at the time of dying. It is one of the three main fields of wholesome action, which are ethical conduct (*sīla*), generosity (*dāna*) or meditation (*bhāvanā*). Only the latter is to be practised at the time of dying, the other two can be remembered as a powerful corresponding action performed during life.

Such must be the corresponding conditions for a human birth. The same prerequisites lead to a birth in the realms of the light beings (*devas*), which also, like the human realm, belong to the sense sphere.

For a birth in the god realms (Brahma world), the corresponding *jhāna* (mental absorption) must be practised at the time of death. In the *jhānā* fine material consciousness is practised, which is of a different kind than sense sphere consciousness. It brings forth the corresponding life continuum in one of the god realms.

These are the happy realms of existence that are attained through wholesome consciousness just before passing away in a life.

If unwholesome consciousness occurs just before the passing away, it leads to a birth in the lower realms of existence, which include the animal realm, the realm of ghosts and the realm of hell beings. The life continuum in these realms has no roots. So it does not have the powerful potential for wholesome action that we have in the human realm.

However, every birth also comes about through craving combined with delusion. Without craving there is no existence.

Craving is unwholesome. Thus human existence is conditioned both by the mental defilement of craving and by a wholesome action. These two causes are the base for experiencing happiness and suffering.

The consciousness with the root of craving as the cause of this human life already occurred at some point during the previous life and was repeated. Because of the repeated occurrence, craving becomes attachment. The craving has the corresponding form of existence as its object, so in the case of humans, for example, there must be the wish for man or woman.

Back to the wholesome consciousness process directly before the passing away:

The object of the wholesome consciousness process close to death can either be an image of a wholesome action performed earlier, which is remembered, a sign of that action, or

a sign of the future birth. Thus, for human birth, it can be the image of the maternal womb. For a reappearance in hell it can be flames, for a reappearance in the animal world it can be forest and meadows.

Or the wholesome action is practised directly in the dying process. This is actually only possible with the practice of meditation.

If the wholesome action is a type of meditation, then the object of meditation appears, which in *samatha* meditation can be a *kasīna* object, for example. In *vipassanā* meditation it may be observing the rapid passing away of a mental or physical phenomenon as an ultimate reality.

A wholesome action that is remembered can be giving. Then either this situation can appear as an object or the donation or some other sign directly related to the action. The object can be experienced through memory and thus appears in the mind consciousness. However, an object can also be perceived at one of the five sense doors. Thus a visual object or a sound can also influence the corresponding next birth.

From the third group of wholesome actions, which is ethical behaviour, an action of restraint from an ethical transgression can be remembered. This may be, for example, that one has restrained oneself from killing a living being when the opportunity arose. It may also be that one has refrained from stealing or cheating.

There is one main cause (*janaka kamma*) of birth, which is one of the described wholesome actions for human birth. This is surrounded by supporting causes (*upatthambhaka kamma*), which are conditioned by other actions. These supporting actions can show up as the conditions under which we are born as human beings, whether we are well cared for, whether we are sick or disabled, etc.. The supporting actions surround the remembered action while it was being performed in life or when it is remembered at the time of death. The supporting actions or thoughts can also be wholesome or unwholesome.

Other wholesome actions that can produce auspicious birth include: conscious abstention from unwholesome actions as ethical transgressions, selflessly helping other beings, neighbourhood concentration with a *samatha* object, paying respect, sharing merit, expressing gratitude, hearing the right teaching, teaching the right teaching, correction of one's view or accepting the right view, etc.

There are four types of kamma that lead to birth:

- Weighty kamma (*garuka kamma*): This is a weighty action which can be either wholesome or unwholesome. It is so powerful that it cannot be replaced by another. A wholesome action, for example, is the practice of *jhānā*. Unwholesome actions that are so serious are patricide, matricide, killing an arahat, wounding a Buddha and maliciously causing a schism in the *Saṅgha* (the community of awakened disciples of the Buddha).

- Near-death kamma (*āsanna*): is an action that is remembered at the near-death moment. A wholesome action leads to happy birth, an unwholesome one to unhappy birth. If there is no weighty kamma, it is usually this kind of kamma that comes into mind at the near-death moment.

- Habitual (*āciṇṇa*) kamma: It is an action that one performs habitually, regularly. It can be wholesome or unwholesome in nature. This kamma only comes into effect when the first two are not present. A habitual, wholesome action can be correct meditation, giving material or spiritual help, an unwholesome one can be earning one's livelihood through unscrupulousness or lying, killing or maltreating living beings, and so on.

- Accumulated kamma (*kaṭattā*): This is any action that is not included in the first three categories and is strong enough to produce birth. This type of kamma only comes into effect when the first three are not present. The action may have occurred several lifetimes ago.

The consciousness at the moment of death, i.e. at the very last moment of a life, which follows the last wholesome or unwholesome process of consciousness close to death, is called dying (*cuti*) because of its demise. The consciousness that immediately follows is called birth (*paṭisandhi*, literally 'reconnection') because of its reconnection with the beginning of a new existence. The consciousness from the previous existence has not migrated into this new existence. There is no consciousness which is not impermanent and migrates from one life to another. Nor is there any core or soul that wanders from one life to another. That is why one cannot speak of rebirth. There is nothing that is reborn.

However, there is a stream of consciousness moments that arise and pass away. In this stream, in accordance with the actions which have an effect, a chain of beings appears which are born in succession.

However, the new consciousness that arises each time at birth does not arise without causes such as kamma, kamma formations, object and so on. They are causes which lie in actions in body,

speech and mind, which can only show their effects on the corresponding stream of consciousness.

Conditional kamma formations produce effects until their potential is exhausted. There is kamma that can have an effect in the same life, in the next life, in a later life or again and again until the attainment of *Nibbāna*. This means that the conditional formations that produce birth are exhausted when death follows the corresponding conditional birth-consciousness. When the effect is exhausted, they produce no new or further effect. Either all defilements (*kilesa*) are removed by then, so that no new birth occurs, or a new kamma shows its effect in a new birth.

Besides the life-continuum consciousness, physical matter is also conditioned by previous actions and also by the above explained last process of consciousness of a life. The kamma of this final process of consciousness and the supporting actions surrounding it influence the composition of the elements in the matter produced by them in the body of the new being.

According to Theravāda Buddhist knowledge of dying and birth, which is based on direct experience, there is no intermediate stage between two lives. A being reappears immediately after death. This may be a short lifetime in a ghost realm, which in other traditions is called an intermediate state. For the mind there are no spatial distances, the chain of existence simply continues in another existence.

5. Life with Regard to Death

Knowledge of this process of dying is important in order to direct one's life towards a happy new birth or towards the end of the cycle of existence.

If we habitually perform wholesome actions, these will also occur in consciousness before death. If we habitually meditate correctly, we can also meditate at the time of death. In this way, there is either the possibility of attaining perfect awakening at the end of this life or of finding birth in an auspicious sphere where the *dhmma* is known. Since the decisive moment at the end of life is of very short duration but of great importance, it is highly advisable that during life we learn to direct our mind so that we are not at the mercy of circumstances and react uncontrolled.

Fear or anxiety is always associated with unwholesome consciousness. It is consciousness associated with the root aversion. Fear at the moment of death thus leads to unhappy birth.

Also, severe pain, which can occur at the moment of death, often leads to consciousness associated with aversion in the untrained mind. It is therefore important to learn in life how to deal with pain and other unpleasant bodily sensations in a mindful and wholesome way. Buddhist teachings offer various very helpful approaches and methods for this. Both concentration meditation and insight meditation create very powerful wholesome moments of awareness. These can lead both to a happy birth or, in the case of insight meditation, to a cutting off of all defilements either during life or at the time of death, if one has become familiar with them in life.

The Buddha has named eleven blessings of loving-kindness meditation (*mettā*), one of these is undisturbed death. So too, the regular practice of loving-kindness towards all beings is one of the powerful preparations for a peaceful death. However, *mettā* meditation alone does not lead to the ultimate overcoming of all mental defilements.

Familiarity with the teachings of the Awakened Ones is very helpful in preventing thoughts of aversion, fear, worry, regret or thoughts associated with anger from arising at the moment of death. All these unwholesome thoughts lead to unhappy birth. In the Numerical Discourses of the teachings (*Aṅguttara Nikāya*), the circumstances of the death of a monk named Phaggunā are recounted. This monk was in great pain. He sent for the Buddha and the Buddha visited him on his deathbed. The Buddha gave him a *dhmma* discourse. Shortly afterwards, the monk Phaggunā died. The Buddha could see that he had attained perfect awakening at the hour of death because of the *dhmma* discourse. The Buddha says that perfect awakening or a lower level of awakening can be attained at the time of death if the Buddha or a disciple expounds the teaching to him or even if one reflects on and investigates the teaching heard earlier.

Death is always separation, separation from the body, from the momentary life continuum, separation from family, partner, children and other loved ones, separation from material possessions, from worldly success, from all the busyness of worldly life. Our consciousness habitually reacts to situations that come into our field of perception, whether through the five senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue and body sensitivity) or through the mind consciousness that makes up the ordinary inner thoughts. If we are used to seeing things and people around us with attachment or aversion and delusion, this kind of reaction will also determine our reactions at the moment of death. If we do not strive in life for independence, letting go and a clear view of appearances, this cannot arise at the moment of death either. That is why it is helpful to start Buddhist practice as early as possible in life.

The Buddha was able to observe 31 realms of existence. Of these, four belong to the so called lower or unhappy realms. They are the animal realm, the hungry ghost realm (*peta*), the ghost realm (*asura*) and the hell realm (*apāya*). Existence in these realms is very sorrowful. Through unwholesome consciousness just before death, birth arises in these realms. Unwholesome consciousness is not only rooted in gross greed, hatred and delusion but slight desire or grief and fear as aversion are also unwholesome consciousnesses and produce birth in these realms.

In addition, there are the blissful realms of existence of the sense sphere, which includes the human realm, and other realms of the lower god realms. Wholesome consciousness of the sense sphere gives birth in these realms. Wholesome consciousness is always free from craving, aversion and delusion.

The other realms of existence belong to the finematerial and non-material planes, which can only be attained through *jhāna*-concentration, which must be practised in the near-death process of consciousness. In these realms there is no suffering, but the life span there is limited; after the expiry of the wholesome kamma, birth can take place again in suffering circumstances.

Then there are the pure realms, where only beings are born who have already attained the third of the four stages of awakening. The beings from these realms no longer return to lower realms of existence. They attain perfect awakening there.

The lifetime in one realm is always limited and afterwards, depending on the action, a lifetime in another realm occurs again. So there is no eternal time in heaven or hell. The beings wander from one existence to the next through craving for it, as long as they have not attained the final awakening.

6. Contemplation on Death

Eight contemplations on death are recommended in the Visuddhi Magga. This systematic reflection strengthens beside the preparation for death concentration and also the faculty of memory.

The eight contemplations are:

Death comes unexpected, not planned

1. Imagine death as a murderer, for it comes suddenly, unexpectedly, not ordered, not planned. Mind and body are virtually separated as if with a sword. It is like a murderer because it is present since conception and accompanies us. We do not know when the time will come for us to die. We cannot decide it.

Death as the decline of worldly success

2. Imagine death as the decay of success. Here in this world we can have progress and success as long as it is not overwhelmed by misfortune. With death, all success, all that we have accumulated as identification with a person, all that we have accumulated as material wealth, is void. Neither the one nor the other can we take with us. What we can take with us are only the results of wholesome and unwholesome actions, for these do not leave us until we have attained final *Nibbāna*. Health ends in sickness, youth in old age, life in death, blessings are eventually followed by misfortune, neither of which is permanent, these are natural laws of life.

Comparison with others

3. Compare yourself with others. One should compare oneself with others in seven ways regarding death, namely, with those of great fame, with those of great merit, with those of great power, with those who have supernormal powers, with those who have great wisdom, with Paccekabuddhas, with fully awakened Buddhas. All these people are victims of death and cannot escape it, because all those we can remember who were rich, who were famous, who were powerful, who had supernatural powers, who were beautiful, have died at some time. From this it is very easy to draw the conclusion that you yourself will also die.

The body is exposed to external dangers

4. Reflect that we have to share the body with others. Our body can be attacked both internally and externally by other living beings. Internally, all kinds of parasites like worms, trichomonads, fungi etc. can attack our body, externally it can be mosquitoes, bees, wasps or even dogs, snakes, scorpions etc. Death can also occur due to these causes.

Dependant life

5. Reflect on the dependancy or decrepitude of life. We are permanently dependant on food, oxygen, temperature, water, change of body position, etc.. If any of these factors becomes imbalanced or absent, life is threatened.

Unknown conditions

6. We are ignorant of when death will occur. We do not know when death will occur. Some beings die very young, even before they have seen the light of day, some become very old, some die middle-aged. Death does not ask when it is most convenient for us and our loved ones. We do not know the time of our life span, nor the disease or accident that will cause our death. Some people die because of a harmless illness, some survive a serious, often fatal illness. Even the place is not known to us, we cannot choose it, we do not know whether we will die in a beautiful place or in a non-beautiful place, we do not know whether it will be clean or dirty around us, whether we will be alone or surrounded by our beloved ones. We also do not know where our next birth will take us, what it will look like there, what conditions we will find there.

Life span is short and limited

7. The lifespan of human existence is limited. Human life is relatively short, only a few people reach a hundred years of lifespan. We are born, grow up, orient ourselves in the world, are adults, have duties and tasks and grow old, use life for spiritual development, distract ourselves or wait for death. All periods last only a few years. Each period is a consequence of the previous one and is followed by the next. We do not know if we will live to see the next period, the next breath may be the last one.

Momentary dying

8. Each moment of life at the ultimate level (*paramattha*) is very short. Reflect on the fact that the physical and mental are made up of tiny single components that are constantly arising and completely passing away after a very short time. We are continuously exposed to this dying in body and mind. There is nothing in the ultimate sense that we can hold on to. All things arise, exist for a short time and then pass away. This is a principle of all conditionally arising phenomena. The only thing we take with us, from one life to another, are the results of what our mind has created, whether wholesome or unwholesome.

Through these eight contemplations, neighbourhood concentration can be achieved.

6. Support for a Dying Person

When we come into contact with the death of other people, our own stability in practice is very important. This enables us to create a calm, harmonious, fear-free atmosphere. For the future birth of the dying person, this spiritual support is much more helpful than any material care. Material comfort can always lead to attachment for the untrained mind, which also creates unwholesome states of mind and leads to unhappy birth.

If the possibility exists, it is very supportive to talk about the teachings leading to awakening while the dying person is still addressable, as is shown with the above mentioned example of the monk Phagguna. Honesty and clarity can be very supportive for the dying person.

When one sees clearly at the moment of death the three characteristics of all phenomena, impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self, very powerful wholesome consciousness arises. Dying people can be encouraged and supported to see this. Wholesome consciousness is always accompanied by a pleasant feeling and joy or quiet equanimity. Thus death can become a pleasant experience.

In order to die with a clear, wholesome view, it is advisable to avoid narcotics such as morphine and opiates, they inhibit and paralyse the mind and lead to anxiety and restlessness internally.

If we ourselves can continuously practice loving kindness meditation and perhaps even enter into *jhānā* with it, this is a very powerful support for any dying person. The heart is softened and wholesome thoughts can arise more easily.

You can also remind the dying person of their good deeds and tell them about them. This triggers joy in wholesome consciousness. If he/she can also remember these, these thoughts can lead to happy birth.

One can also show a Buddha image, as the mind then strives towards where the Buddha's teachings exist.

One should in any case avoid making the dying person sad or anxious or remorseful thinking about bad deeds, because these states of mind are always associated with aversion (*dosa*) and lead to unhappy birth.

7. Contemplation of a Corpse as Preparation for a Fear-free Death

The intellectual preoccupation with death and dying is not sufficient to integrate this topic of existence into our lives. In Buddhist meditation practice there are different ways of approaching this subject on a deeper spiritual level in direct experience.

Asubha meditation, meditation on non-beauty, with corpses in various stages of decay as the object, is taught by the Buddha in the Mahā-Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (Great Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness) as a contemplation on the impermanence of the body and its 'beauty', as well as the selflessness of existence, in order to overcome desire and craving. It is a somewhat unusual contemplation in our western world, where on the one hand we invest so much to beautify this body and on the other hand we push death and impermanence out of our consciousness.

Seeing craving as one of the essential defilements of the mind that bring about all the suffering of this existence, *asubha* meditation is a very effective method to reduce craving and thus suffering. If we wish to look at our lives from all angles in order to come to insight and liberation, this meditation is a part of the path that we should not omit, for there is nothing more certain about this life than that we will die. When we die, we cannot take our body with us. It is a fact that our body and also that of our loved ones will rot, and this rotting process will lead to unpleasant impressions. So this meditation of conceptual contemplation of the dead body is an enrichment for our insight process and at the same time a good exercise in concentration. We can use it to reduce or dissolve attachment to our body and that of others. This makes letting go at the moment of death much easier.

Finding a corpse in the nine stages of decomposition described in the Mahā-Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta is not easy in modern times. One can therefore take a dead person seen in the past, a short time after death had occurred, as an object for this meditation. The corpse should be of the same sex as the practitioner. Visualize this corpse until it actually becomes visible before the mind's eye. If one practices the fourth *jhāna* with another meditation subject, such as mindfulness of in- and outbreath (*ānāpānasati*) or white *kaṣiṇa*, it is easy to visualize an image from memory. If one has practised this exercise in previous lives, it is also easy to develop the counterpart sign (*paṭibhāga-nimitta*).

If it does not appear in this way, one can support the arising of an image according to Visuddhi Magga in eleven ways to develop concentration. One should start with the following six signs:

- Colour: imagine the colour of the skin: yellow, reddish, blue, white, brown and so on.
- With regard to the marks, determine whether it is the body of a young, middle-aged or elderly person.
- Regarding the shape, imagine the shape of the head, the neck, the hands, the torso, the navel, the hips, the chest, the legs, the feet.
- As to the direction, imagine that the corpse has two directions: the lower, from the navel downwards; the upper, from the navel upwards.
- As for the location, imagine that the hands are in this place, the feet in this place, the head in this place, the torso in this place.
- With regard to the boundary, imagine the body bounded downwards by the soles of the feet, upwards by the hair, in between by the skin; and up to the boundary points it is filled with the thirty-two parts of the body. Or else, imagine that on this body this is the boundary of the hands, this of the feet, this of the head, this of the trunk. Or else, whatever part of this corpse one grasps, this should be the boundary.

If the picture does not appear clearly in this way, then grasp the object in the following five ways: With regard to the joints, cavities, deeper points, higher points, with regard to every place.

- With regard to the joints means here: With regard to the 180 joints. First imagine the 14 main joints: 3 joints each of the right and left arm, the right and left leg, a neck joint and a hip joint and so one can proceed to imagine other joints.
- Regarding the openings: Note the spaces between the hands and feet, which are considered to be openings, as well as the abdominal cavity and the ear-holes; further, whether the eye or mouth is closed or open.
- With regard to the deeper points: Determine the deepest parts of the corpse, such as the eye

socket, mouth cavity, etc..

- With regard to higher parts: Determine the raised parts of the corpse, such as knees, chest, forehead.
- With regard to each place: notice the corpse in all places; and while you wander with your mind over the whole corpse, fix your mind on that place which appears clearly, reflecting: 'unattractive object, unattractive object'.

After this exercise, the learning sign (*uggaha-nimitta*) may appear, one should then fix one's concentration on the image of the corpse until the counterpart sign (*paṭibhāga-nimitta*) appears at the mind eye. Consider it again and again as 'not beautiful' until full concentration (*appanā samādhi*) is achieved and the mind enters the first *jhāna*. The difference between the two images is that the learning sign (*uggaha-nimitta*) appears just like the body one has seen. The counterpart sign (*paṭibhāga-nimitta*), on the other hand, appears like an inflated being, round, thick, smooth and possibly larger than the original body, and this makes it unpleasant. Due to the *jhāna* factors developed in access concentration and also in full concentration, initial application, sustained application of the mind to the object, joy, happiness and one-pointedness occur in the mind of the meditator during this contemplation.

Visualization of one's own Corpse

One can then continue the meditation by replacing the corpse with one's own body as a corpse. One should begin to contemplate on the certain death of all living beings, on the end of every happy life situation, on leaving behind all material goods and all loved ones. Even the most powerful beings cannot escape death. One reflects on the dependence of the interaction of the organs or the composition of the elements, which can be disturbed by diseases, and that death can occur through any disease. Or one can also consider the general vulnerability of this body, that we can be killed willingly or unwillingly by the behaviour of other people, whereby death can occur in an unforeseeable time. The fact that one cannot determine when and where one will die should also be kept in mind, as well as the fact that we only inhabit this body for a very limited time.

If one wishes to practise this meditation, one should establish concentration with another object of meditation, e.g. the white *kaṣiṇa*, then one should visualize the body used in the non-beauty meditation, and then replace it with one's own. Then one should hold the concentration well, with the thoughts: 'death is certain, life is uncertain'; or 'the life force will dry up' or 'death will come'.

If one does not remain well concentrated in this exercise, thoughts of fear, worry, sorrow, emotion or aversion easily arise, which are an obstacle to the development of meditation. Only when one proceeds in this way does one's mindfulness become well established about the topic of death, and one can soon attain access concentration (*upacāra-samādhi*) with the beautiful wholesome consciousness. This consciousness has pleasant results because it is wholesome. It is accompanied either by joy or by quiet equanimity. When we practise like this again and again, it becomes a habit to see death like this, and we are not at the mercy of fear and aversion. This wholesome consciousness can also arise at the moment of death. States of mind associated with anxiety, fear and insecurity cannot be overcome simply by not wanting to have them. Exercise is essential because it strengthens the opposing factors such as confidence, calm, mindfulness, etc.

This contemplation is a support to give meaning to the short life, to spend one's time with wholesome things, to let go of attachments and it is also a preparation for death so that one can die free of fear, anxiety and confusion, which is very essential for a happy next birth. Not to be neglected should also be the urgency for developing mindfulness and insight (*vipassanā*) meditation, which arises from the profound contemplation of death as impermanence, suffering and

non-self, for no one can determine their own natural death. Mindfulness and insight (*vipassanā*) meditation are in turn preparations for a peaceful, clear death with full awareness.

We can decisively influence the inner circumstances under which we will die, and also the conditions under which we will be born again if we have not achieved perfect awakening in this life, through such contemplation on death and through the practice of mindfulness and *vipassanā* meditation.

In insight meditation we see very clearly the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self of all phenomena. We become familiar with them and can see life and death with wisdom. With death, which ends a life span, an existence, everything we see as 'I' and 'mine' dies. We have to leave behind all relationships, business, all occupations that bring us pleasure. All occupations that carry us from one moment to the next in life are abruptly cut off. The only thing that will accompany us is the result of the consciousness and motivation with which we have performed these actions.

The practice of dealing with death calmly and equanimously is also an enrichment for the many situations in daily life in which we experience impermanence. We learn to face the many deaths we encounter again and again not with disappointment, rigidity, depression, fear, inhibition, etc., but with wholesome, clear consciousness.



8. A story from the Time of Buddha Gotama about Death

Kisāgotamī was married to a rich man from Sāvatti. She gave birth to a son. The son died a short time after he could walk. Kisāgotamī was overwhelmed with grief. Kisāgotamī had never seen anyone dying before. She forbade the son to be taken to the cremation ground. She walked in the streets of Sāvatti with the dead son on her hips and asked everyone she met if there was any medicine to bring the son back to life.

People thought she had gone mad. One man was compassionate with her and sent her to the Buddha, who should have such medicine. Kisāgotamī went to the Buddha. The Buddha instructed her to bring mustard seeds from a house where no one had died yet. With her deceased son in her arms, she went from house to house asking if anyone had died there. She could not find a house. She thus realized that not only had someone in her family, namely her son, died, but that there were more people who had died than those who were alive. At this thought, her relationship with death changed and she no longer clung to the dead body of her deceased son. She left the body in the jungle and went back to the Buddha and told him that she could not find a house where not had died anybody.

The Buddha said to her, 'Gotamī, you thought you were the only one who had lost her son. As you have now realized, death comes to all beings. Before their desires are satisfied, death comes and takes them away.'

Hearing these words of the Buddha, Kisāgotamī realized the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-selfness in all existences and attained stream-entry.

Shortly afterwards, Kisāgotamī ordained as a nun. One day when she was lighting the lamps, she saw them flare up and go out, and she realized at that moment the arising and passing away of beings. The Buddha asked her to contemplate intensely on the impermanent nature of all beings in order to attain ultimate *Nibbāna*.

The Buddha commented on this incident:

Whoever directs all his thoughts to possessions and children,
Death takes him as the flood drowns a sleeping village.

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9. Overcoming Death and all Unwholesome States of Mind through Insight

The Buddha, when explaining the four noble truths, the core of the entire Buddha's teaching, mentioned death as a kind of suffering.

The Buddha's teaching strives for freedom from suffering on a fundamental level. It therefore has as its goal deathlessness. This goal, in which there is neither birth nor death, is called *Nibbāna* in the Pāli language. It is the end of that which is subject to death, namely body and mind. This happy goal, where there is no birth and death, no arising and passing away, is attained by overcoming all mental defilements rooted in craving, aversion and ignorance. As we have seen, causes of birth lie in craving and ignorance. Since birth always causes death, these are also the root causes of death. The Buddha called craving and ignorance unwholesome roots because they always produce unpleasant results. Therefore, freedom from suffering can only be achieved by overcoming these unwholesome roots in such a way that they can no longer appear in the corresponding stream of consciousness. This goal is attainable through intensive meditation practice in a human lifetime. It is the attainment of holiness, called arahatship in the Pāli language. It is the highest goal of all Buddhist practice, which can only be achieved when the mind is completely purified. It is the complete overcoming of all mental defilements. Since death can only come from ignorance, deathlessness is a logical consequence of the complete overcoming of ignorance.

The Buddha Gotama and all Buddhas before him were also arahats. These are beings who have overcome all mental defilements. Buddhas are always arahats, they are not reborn. They teach in their last life. But not all arahats are Buddhas. Many disciples of the Buddha Gotama were also arahats. It was their last life, as all causes for existence were overcome.

Birth with the result of inevitable death comes only from craving and ignorance. When these two impure roots are completely cut off, there is no new birth. This is a natural law.

The Buddha said it was a noble quest to seek that which was not subject to ageing, disease and death. He found the result, called *Nibbāna*, through his practice of meditation. He called it an impure search to run after the things of the world that are subject to ageing, disease and death.

The attainment of deathlessness is the fundamental solution to overcome all that is unsatisfactory. All sorrow, pain, grief, despair, distress are only possible through existence. When one clearly understands this fact, one walks the path that leads to the cessation of existence, to the cutting off of all unwholesome states of mind.

In order to let energy arise on this path, contemplation on death is very supportive. Our human life is not very long, so we should not waste the time, but take care of the purification of our mind. Human life offers extremely good conditions for this, especially at the present time when the Buddha's teaching still exists as a living tradition. The good conditions are given by the fact that we as human beings can experience both the highest happiness and the deepest suffering. And we are in the fortunate situation of being able to reflect and understand our circumstances. Animals are not able to do this.

If we do not understand death, we cannot live meaningfully. A meaningful life can only consist of wanting to overcome all mental defilements, which inevitably results in ultimate happiness and deathlessness. Overcoming all mental defilements is the only way to overcome all suffering and unsatisfactoriness, for mental defilements always produce unpleasant results. Mental defilements always cause harm to ourselves and also to other beings, so the desire to finally overcome them is very sublime and positive.

Since existence always involves many unsatisfactory experiences, the Buddha taught deathlessness, which is the end of becoming, as the goal of ending all suffering. For if there is no becoming, there is no suffering and also no death.

This goal can only be reached when the mind is freed from all defilements which lie in aversion,

craving and ignorance. It is a natural law that existence can then no longer occur. This is not a deluded, pessimistic view of annihilation, but the sublime desire of overcoming all defilements. Only when one observes, analyses and penetrates existence and understands conditional arising, as well as impermanence, does this sublime desire arise and one can walk this joyful, delightful path of purification.

Better it is to live one day seeing the Deathless (*Nibbāna*)
than to live a hundred years
without ever seeing the Deathless.

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