

Living in the Light of Death

*Aging, illness and death are treasures
for those who understand them.
They're Noble Truths, Noble Treasures.
If they were people,
I'd bow down to their feet every day.*

~ Ajaan Lee

We cannot speak about aging and awakening without speaking about death and dying. If we hold any intention to awaken, to ripen into the spiritual maturity offered in the unfolding of this precious life, we need to confront our mortality. Opening to our own fleeting impermanence is an act both wise and kind.

This isn't a call to hop on the icebergs, although there probably occurred deep transformation, deep release into awareness beyond the separate sense of self, for those Inuit elders who, on their tiny islands of ice, floated away from their known world and their loved ones. Perhaps we can think of it as a call to the iceberg experience.

Meditating on death begs us to look at what remains frivolous in our lives, what remains careless and unexamined, where we suffer in our illusions, what beliefs keep us feeling separate from the sacred and from each other. Most of us have lived many decades on the surface of being, whistling around the outskirts of awareness.

Meditating on death is one of the special conditions that facilitates awakening. Wisdom traditions have employed it as skillful means for millennia. It is, at the end of life, one of the most powerful of the special conditions that facilitates the grace in dying. The experience of being changes when the heart takes in the fact of death. Deeply aware of our own impermanence, every fleeting moment is recognized as precious.

Meditating on death instantly calls us to question on the deepest of levels. What am I doing? What do I want? What does this all mean? What is it all about? What is spirit? What is self? Who or what is the "I" that is asking the questions? Our desire to explore, to inquire, to see through the confusion and sense of alienation that have led so much of our lives for us, amplifies.

Contemplating our own mortality, taking in the fact of our mortality, our precariously impermanent existence, can call us to complete and thorough accountability. It can call us to instant re-ordering of our (mostly unconscious) habits, a rearranging of our priorities and our

intentions. It blocks off all of our habitual detours into denial. It forces us to face the way we've lived our lives, the choices we've made, the polestars we've chosen.

Contemplating our own mortality can spur a sense of urgency, an urgency to become more earnest, more sincere, more aligned in the call to awaken. The urgency spurs us to remain mindful of our deepest intention, to no longer allow our experience of being to sink so carelessly into mindlessness.

If we keep the fact of our mortality at the level of conception, in our head, it remains as just another piece of information, like the number of calories in a dish of ice cream or how to plant a tomato seedling. To take in that we will die and that it is uncertain when—that it could be anytime, even today—at the level of our heart is an experiential understanding of the whole being that can actually affect and transform us.

When we die, the world our mind experienced will be swept away. It does not endure, just as this passing phenomenon we call "me" does not endure. When we die, all of our thoughts and concerns, all of our prides and attachments, our universe, will cease.

The objects we so loved will be priced for a tag sale. A penny on the dollar. Everything that we are concerned about in this very moment will not matter at all: bills, quarrels, sensed inadequacies, fears, vanities, hopes for the stock market, what to have for dinner. They will not matter at all.

We have spent a long time fretting over, defending, preening, despairing over a sense of self that has always been illusory, a deeply invested concept. Nisargadatta, a profound Indian sage, gives heartfelt advice:

*You have enclosed yourself in time and space,
squeezed yourself into the span of a lifetime
and the volume of a body....
You cannot be rid of problems
without abandoning illusions.*

We *already live* in grace, in the sacred formless. Lost in self, though, lost in a "form only" paradigm, we miss the sacred formless, always everpresent. We have been asleep for so many decades, lost in our deeply embroidered, dream-like narratives, paying the price with suffering great and small. We miss the wordless grace, within and around, permeating every moment and every appearance.

Jesus bore witness to awakening from the dream of self. In Gethsemane, he experienced his humanity—aware of his own singularity, aware of self. Even with the depth of his realizations and the magnitude of his love, he experienced the angst of his own impending death.

Jesus prayed, in Gethsemane, the passage way, through the chaotic minds of clinging and reluctance. Surrendering the exclusivity of self-reference--in love, for love, arms wide open on the cross—he emerged into Christ consciousness, transcending the smallness of self, obliterating the separation self imposes.

There is profound beauty in the view, the example, of Jesus' offering, his surrender.

The immensity of his act is worthy of deep reverence and respect, even awe. It doesn't, though, need to cause us to back away from the spiritual journey as if the journey and the arrival are beyond our capacity. His was an encouraging act, not a discouraging one. It would be mistaken to conclude that the journey is something for others who are perhaps more "worthy" or "braver" or "more evolved."

As ordinary beings, it is completely possible, with intention and effort, to free ourselves from the confines of "selfing" in our ordinary lives. It is possible to do this in a completely, beautifully ordinary way. We can do it in our house, on our street, within our family. Still voting, still cooking, still waving to the neighbors, shouting "fore" before we swing, and stopping at the stop sign.

As aging beings, we are nearing our expiration date. Future shrinks. Now is the time to awaken, to offer ourselves to ripening, if we have any desire to do so at all.

We can practice meditating as if we were dying, a profound and skillful way to practice. We can come to intimately know the unfolding stages of chaos, surrender, and transcendence in a frequent contemplation of our own mortality. St. Augustine recognized this when he counseled all who sought his wisdom to "die daily." We ask the meaningful questions. Where am I most deeply attached? Where am I most deeply anxious? What will be lost? What is it that dies?

When we sit to meditate on mortality, we can think that this may be the last time I may ever be able to do this. The power of that thought lies in the fact that the statement holds truth. We can sit to meditate with the intention to imitate death. We can sit to meditate with the intention to let it all go, inspired to explore what lies beyond self.

Although we certainly need a functioning self while in the midst of this lifetime, the belief in a separate, independent sense of self as the shining glory of our potential keeps us small and defended and un-free. We are, in union with the sacred, so much more. The surrender of an illusion buys us entry into grace, immeasurably more than worth the price.

We sit deliberately, with noble posture and noble intention.

We breathe. Progressively, we free our awareness from sensations. We free our awareness from the "I" we imputed upon the sensations and the "mine" with which we tried to claim them. We relieve ourselves of all of our mistaken identifications, loosening our attachment to them, letting them go.

Breathing, we let go of the survival based need to label all arisings. Dog barking, wind blowing, me meditating. We let go of the labels. Each gives rise to a story and a teller of the story.

Breathing, we let go of the mental images with which we've formed and colored the arisings. We let go of the clinging and aversion to the mental images of our own creation, the mental images which we believe to be external and which we thought would fulfill our neediness or hold our fear at bay, the mental images we hold responsible for our own reactive feeling tones.

Breathing, we free our capacity to believe from our preconceptions and assumptions, self-invested words we've imputed upon neural firings.

We completely let go of all that chaos and our attachment to and identification with it. We liberate ourselves from illusions and, cleared of all that congested weight, the burden of being a self, we surrender, entering awareness that is spacious and quiet and uncongested.

We just die into silence. Die to the past. Die to the future. Die to the breath. Completely let go. The silence reveals itself as refuge, as awareness that can be trusted, tenderly loving and resounding with the majesty and the mystery of the sacred.

This silence is the practice of absorption, unruffled by even the breath of self, taught in all traditions. To practice it with the recognition that it is similar to the process of dying, to the process of leaving behind attention's entrapment in body and conceptual mind, is to amplify its power.

Such a meditation is about letting go, surrendering--each letting go a death of a mistaken belief. If we want to wake up, we open our eyes. Releasing every illusory prop, we let go into the ripened and hallowed state for which this life was intended.

It is wise and kind to engage in this practice, to enter into the holy sacrament of the defeat of ego's illusions. Living in the light of death, we release our singular attachment to the separate sense of self. With that release, fears of both dying *and* living dissolve.

This skillful means is a method of ripening, of coming to spiritual fruition. Ripened, we can then offer the sweet fruit of the awakened state, every noble quality, to all who we encounter.

There is no more noble use of this time of our aging. May we all become elders, more than simply old, more than only self.

Kathleen Dowling Singh is a dharma practitioner and transpersonal psychologist. She is the author of *The Grace in Dying: How We Are Transformed Spiritually As We Die*. "Living in the Light of Death," adapted from *The Grace in Aging*, to be published by Wisdom Publications in 2014, appeared in "Oneing: Ripening," a publication of the Rohr Institute.