

# OPENING TO OUR OWN MORTALITY

## Meditation on Death

*The longer we are together  
the larger death grows around us.  
How many we know by now  
who are dead! We, who were young,  
now count the cost of having been...  
Our hair turns white with our ripening  
as though to fly away in some  
coming wind, bearing the seed  
of what we know. It was bitter to learn  
that we come to death as we come  
to love, bitter to face  
the just and solving welcome  
that death prepares. But that is bitter  
only to the ignorant, who pray  
it will not happen. Having come  
the bitter way to better prayer, we have  
the sweetness of ripening.*

—Wendell Berry

We cannot speak about aging and awakening without speaking about death and dying; it certainly seems to come up at every turn. We need to confront our mortality.

Although there probably occurred deep transformation, deep release, for those Inuit elders who, on their tiny islands of ice, floated away from their villages and their loved ones, this isn't a call to "hop on an iceberg." Perhaps we can think of it as a call to the iceberg experience.

Meditating on death opens us up deeply to the precious gift of this life and the boundless gift we can make of it. It begs us to look at what remains frivolous in our lives, what remains careless. Most of us have lived so many decades on the surface of being, whistling around the outskirts of awareness.

We rarely pause to question, to look. Where have I not forgiven? Where have I not apologized? Who have I not loved well? Who have I not thanked? Where do I still cling? What fears do I still harbor? Such deeply and thoroughly honest contemplation allows us to change what can be changed and die with less regret.

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Meditating on death is one of the special conditions that facilitates spiritual transformation, illumination. 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. When we are deeply aware of our own impermanence, every fleeting moment is recognized as precious. Our desire to *be* in each moment amplifies. Contemplating the fact that we truly do not know if we will still be alive in this human body with the next breath, we can witness a stunning decrease in our attachment to and interest in anything but now. Presence begins to blossom.

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, intensifies in urgency.

We have no idea how much time each of us has left to clearly see—which is to say, awaken.

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 reordering, a rearranging of our priorities and our intentions. A deep opening to our own mortality brings us to our knees and down to the nitty-gritty. 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. The urgency is not to panic and try harder, squinching up and exerting and striving. The urgency is to become more earnest, more sincere, more aligned in our spiritual intention. The urgency reminds us to become less frivolous, to remain mindful of our deepest intention, to not allow our experience of being to sink so carelessly into mindlessness.

The Pali language has a word, *samvega*, that refers to the urgent need to practice, to engage in awakening practices. It denotes a healthy desire that can arise out of a heightened sense of our own mortality, our own ephemeral impermanence.

Meditating on death allows us to take the conceptual understandings that we will die and that the time of our death is uncertain to the level of our heart. That distance—from head to heart—is a long journey with many roadblocks, many obstacles, many bumps in the road.

Meditating on our own death allows us to open to a truth. Opening to the truth, we marinate in it. We allow understanding and insight into that truth to percolate and permeate our being, pruning old neural connections here and there, and allowing new neural pathways, new and more beneficial habits of mind, to come into being.

Contemplating our own mortality can bring concept into direct experience. It is a journey from nodding intellectual understanding of the concept of impermanence to the experience of it as a moment-by-moment reality. 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 understanding of the whole being that can actually affect and transform us.

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. When we take it into our heart, the truth of the recognition knocks every cell in our being with the shock. We get it. It is so.

We cut off a lot of recognition at the level of our neck. We block the very truth that will set us free.

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There is nothing that can keep us from death. No pleading, begging, or bribing. The world offers no shelter from death. There is no one who can protect 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.

Our eyeglasses will be useless to anyone else. The objects we so loved will be priced for a tag sale, a penny on the dollar. Someone else will access our accounts and sell the car we dreamed of for so long. Someone will cut down the roses we planted so many years ago and tended so carefully. Someone will paint the house a different color or maybe even raze it.

Everything that we are concerned about in this very moment will not matter at all: bills, quarrels, sensed inadequacies, the sale at the mall, fears, vanities, hopes for the stock market, what to have for dinner. They will not matter at all.

Although we have been a slave to craving and aversion for all of these decades, when we die we leave every illusory object of craving and aversion behind.

We leave self behind. It was always a fiction—allowing functionality certainly, but a fiction nonetheless. We mistakenly took everything personally. Death is a letting-go of this sense of personalization, of self-reference. Our liberation occurs in a larger perspective.

We've lived in the unease and the difficulty of taking everything personally. We have spent a long time fretting over, defending, preening, despairing over a sense of self that has always been an illusion, a deeply invested concept.

*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.*

—Nisargadatta

Let's change this before we die.

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It is the nature of selfing to find life problematic. With that view, a new problem, like another wave on the ocean, will always arise. We're now old enough to recognize that it is not relief from problems that we want so much; we have a growing sense that relief is only a temporary respite. It does not last. We want the experience of unshakeable peace in the face of any arising, every new wave. We want the grace that only lies in awareness freed from self-reference, self-grasping, self-cherishing. Such awareness is freed from personalizing each wave.

Ken McLeod, an American Dharma teacher, has said that at every stage of practice, there is a price to be paid for increased clarity and greater freedom. The price, he says, is the loss of another illusion. It seems helpful to think of our illusions as tokens for the ride. We grieve our way to awakening, paying our way with the release of all of our cherished and convincing fictions. We drop them one by one, the footsteps of our path.

Jesus bore witness to the truth of awakening from the dream of self. In Gethsemane, he shared the human being that he was—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, for his passageway through the chaotic minds of clinging and reluctance. Surrendering, arms wide open on the cross, he entered the dying process and emerged as Christ consciousness, transcendent.

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

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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 a mistake to contemplate the meaning of the act and arrive at the conclusion that the journey is something for others who are perhaps more "worthy" or "braver" or more "evolved."

We don't need to climb a cross to attain this degree of liberation or spend thirty years in a cave. Nothing so dramatic. Wisdom traditions abound with such inspirations and examples because it takes a lot to inspire us. It takes a very loud wake-up call to rouse us.

We're all ordinary beings, and 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.

One of the biggest spurs for our journey can come with deep and regular contemplation of our own mortality as a focal point, as an ever-present truth to hold in awareness. It, more than just about any other contemplation, forces us to ask questions at a level of depth from which we may never have inquired before. Where am I most deeply attached? Where am I most deeply anxious? What will be lost? What is it that dies?

A friend, approaching seventy, said that she thought that the universe's last lessons for her in this lifetime would come through her body. Having given up all else, she said, that will be the learning lab. Am I this flesh I sense and perceive? What is the nature of this body? What is the nature of my relationship with this fleshy body I call "me" or "mine"?

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. Saint Augustine recognized this when he counseled all who sought his heart-felt advice to "die daily."

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When we sit to meditate on mortality, we can think that this may be the last time we 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.

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.

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 relieve ourselves of the mental images with which we’ve formed and colored the arisings. We relieve ourselves of the clinging and aversion to the mental images of our own creation, the mental images which we believed to be external and 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 relieve ourselves of our preconceptions and assumptions and beliefs, 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 relieve ourselves of illusion-chasing and, cleared of all the congested weight of selfing, we enter surrender.

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, tender and resounding with the luminous quiet of mystery.

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 impersonal process of leaving behind, becoming secluded from body and conceptual mind—is to amplify its power.

We will see clearly all of the places where we hold back, all of the places that bind us. This meditation is about letting go, surrendering. Each letting go is a death, an acknowledgement of the moment just passing, the moment that is no longer. We practice letting go with a deep understanding of why it is so important to let go. Releasing every prop, we let go into freedom. Releasing every fetter, we enter the quietly blissful relief of peace.

We engage in this practice in order to becoming familiar with the freedom that lies beyond craving to self. It prepares us for dying and it opens us for living.

We will see, as we practice the meditation, the quick little mind of the ego looking for a loophole, any loophole, where it might continue, just as it is.

The sense of self believes it owns, is the possessor of, sensations, thoughts, feelings, and patterns. Just the reverse is so. Sensations, thoughts, feelings, and patterns give rise to the illusory sense of self. When they cease, so too does the sense of self. It will kick and scream, though, like a toddler being put to bed, mad at missing the party.

Engaging in the practice, over and over, on a frequent, rhythmic basis will allow us to become familiar with the laying down of self, with surrender. It is wise to do.

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This special condition of confronting our own mortality will be jet fuel for our practice. Buddha's observation was that meditation on death—confronting our own mortality, allowing ourselves to experience awareness without any reference to self—makes the deepest imprint on our minds, just as the elephant's footprint makes the deepest imprint on the ground.

To know awareness beyond selfing is to experience being without fear, perhaps for the very first time. Our fear of death is the same fear that keeps us so limited in our living. They are the same fear, the fear of death and the fear of living.

To know awareness beyond self is to be free from ignorance. With illusions undone, we are no longer separate. Fear disappears as we rest in communion. May we all experience the blessing of unselfconscious fearlessness.

