

# Death and Dying

by Ajahn Jagaro

More often than not in this society of ours, which is a life-affirming society, a beauty- and pleasure-affirming society, the topic of death and dying is avoided. Not only this society, but most societies, including traditional Buddhist cultures, avoid the topic of death as though it were something unpleasant, depressing, to be avoided; even a bad omen: "Don't talk about it as you may encourage it to happen!" Of course this attitude is not very wise and certainly not in keeping with the Buddhist attitude. So this evening I would like to speak on the Buddhist attitude to death and dying.

## Why think about it?

First of all, why should we think about death? Why should we contemplate it? Not only did the Buddha encourage us to speak about death, he encouraged us to actually think about it, contemplate it and reflect on it regularly.

On one occasion the Buddha asked several of the monks, "How often do you contemplate death?"

One of them replied, "Lord, I contemplate death every day."

"Not good enough," the Buddha said, and asked another monk, who replied,

"Lord, I contemplate death with each mouthful that I eat during the meal."

"Better, but not good enough," said the Buddha, "What about you?"

The third monk said, "Lord, I contemplate death with each inhalation and each exhalation."

That's all it takes, the inhalation comes in, it goes out, and one day it won't come in again - and that's it. That's all there is between you and death, just that inhalation, the next inhalation.

Obviously the Buddha considered this a very important part of meditation and training towards becoming more wise and more peaceful. Why is it that this contemplation is encouraged? Because we don't usually want to think or talk about death. Be it conscious or unconscious, there is a fear of death, a tendency to avoid it, a reluctance to come face to face with this reality.

Death is very much a part of life; it's just as much a part of life as birth. In fact, the moment of birth implies death. From the moment of conception it is only a matter of time before death must come - to everyone. No one can escape it. That which is born will die. The mind and body which arise at the time of conception develop, grow and mature. In other words, they follow the process of aging. We call it growing up at first, then growing old, but it's just a single process of maturing, developing, evolving towards the inevitable death. Everyone of you has signed a contract, just as I did. You may not remember signing that contract, but everyone has said, "I agree to die." Every living being, not only human, not only animal, but in every plane, in every realm, everywhere there is birth, there is the inevitable balance - death.

Today, according to a book I read, about 200,000 people died. That is the average everyday. Apparently about 70 million people die every year. That's a lot of people isn't it? The population of Australia is only about 16 million and every year 70 million people die by various means, 200,000 in one day. That's an awful lot of people. But in our society we have very little contact with death. We are not usually brought face to face with death, we are not encouraged to contemplate death or come to terms with it.

What we are usually encouraged to do is to avoid it and live as if we were never going to die. It is quite remarkable that intellectually we all know we are going to die, but we all live as if we are never going to die. This avoidance, this negation, usually means that we will always be afraid of death. As long as there is fear of death, life itself is not being lived at its best. So one of the very fundamental reasons for contemplating death, for making this reality fully conscious, is that of overcoming fear. The contemplation of death is not for making us depressed or morbid, it is rather for the purpose of helping to free us from fear. That's the first reason, which I will explain later in more detail.

The second reason is that contemplation of death will change the way we live and our attitudes toward life. The values that we have in life will change quite drastically once we stop living as if we are going to live forever, and we will start living in a quite different way.

The third reason is to develop the ability to approach death in the right way. By that I mean dying, the way we actually die.

The contemplation of death has three benefits:

- relieving fear
- bringing a new quality to our lives, enabling us to live our lives with proper values, and
- enabling us to die a good death.

It enables us to live a good life and die a good death. What more could you want?

## **Being conscious of death**

First, let's look at the contemplation of death. This entails actually making oneself acknowledge death by consciously bringing into mind the fact: "I am going to die." You may say, "I know that." But you don't know it; not fully, not consciously.

There should be many opportunities to do this contemplation, but in present day society there are not, simply because we are so far removed from death. We don't see it. Oh yes, you see it on television and at the movies, but it's all a game, you know they are only acting. It's only a game isn't it? You sit there and watch people being shot, hundreds of them, and it's only a game. This actually has the opposite effect. It makes you even less able to acknowledge the reality of death, because it's like a game, it's not real, it's reinforcing the perception that death is not real.

We are very far removed from the experience of death, not because death is not to be found, but because of the way our society is structured. How many of you see death? How many of you see dying people? How many of you are present at the time of death? How many of you have the opportunity to sit with a corpse? Not many of you have that opportunity.

But it doesn't matter how far removed you are, you can never be completely removed, because it is such an imposing reality, especially when someone in your family dies. Even so, most often it is taken away from you. People die in hospital. If they die at home you call the funeral directors and they take the body away and put it in the funeral parlour. If you have a service the body is all sealed up and then it is cremated for you.

So you have very little contact, which is very different from the way things used to be. In earlier times, in more simple cultures, if a member of your family died you washed the corpse, dressed it, and burned it or buried it yourself. You had to do it; no one was going to come and do it for you. You, your family and your friends had to dress the body, carry it, collect the wood, make a pile and put the body on the pile of wood and burn it.

This is how cremation was - very basic. In fact this is very much how we still cremate bodies in our forest monastery in Thailand. There we usually use a very simple coffin that the villagers make themselves. They just collect some planks, knock up a coffin, put the body in it - no lid - put it in the hall and everybody is there to see and contemplate it. Then they make a pile of logs, place the body on top, and burn it while everybody stands around and watches. So there is an opportunity to see the natural end of life, the end of one cycle of life. And that has a very good effect in helping us to rise up and come to terms with this reality, rather than it being a ghost, a skeleton in the closet waiting to sneak out and haunt you.

Anything that is not brought out and fully confronted, fully come to term with, can have power over you. Ghosts usually haunt at night when you can't see them. They sneak up behind you when you're not looking and can't see them. When you put on the light there is no ghost. In order to have power over us, to make us frightened, it must be something that we can't face, something that we can't fully, consciously, clearly see. It must remain unknown and mysterious. As long as we allow death to remain that way it will bring fear into our hearts.

But through contemplation, through attention and consciously finding ways of bringing this fact into the mind and coming to terms with it, fear can be overcome. This is why the contemplation of death is one of the main contemplations in Buddhism. It can be done in many ways. Most mornings in our monastery we chant one particular reflection which goes:

I am of the nature to age, I have not gone beyond aging. I am of the nature to sicken, I have not gone beyond sickness. I am of the nature to die, I have not gone beyond dying. All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will change, will become otherwise, will become separated from me.

When you contemplate this reality with a peaceful mind and really bring it into consciousness, it has a powerful effect in overcoming the fear of old age, sickness, death and separation. It's not for making us morbid, it's for freeing us from fear. That is why we contemplate death: it's not that we are looking forward to dying, but that we want to live and die without fear. So to have an opportunity to be with a dead body is to be encouraged. It's good if you have such an opportunity to actually sit and be with the body, to actually witness the end of a human life, to ask yourself, "Is this death?"

When you die, you can't take anything with you - not even your own body. In Buddhist monasteries this is considered so important that quite often skeletons are displayed in the meditation hall. In one monastery there was a monk who left instructions that after his death his body, fully robed and sitting in full lotus, was to be put in a glass case. There he sat slowly disintegrating. Written on the front of the glass case was: "I used to be like you; soon you will be like me." Now when you see that, it has quite a powerful impact. It's a fact you just can't escape.

The fact is that every single person is going to die. This is not a prediction I'm making through clairvoyant powers. It's just the inescapable fact that because you're born, you're going to die. All that remains to be known is the time: when is it going to happen? That's the unknown factor. The fact that you are going to die is not questionable, it is reality.

So we contemplate. When there is death it's good to come into contact with it. Someone who was living perhaps ten minutes ago is now dead. Yes, that's what's going to happen to me, too. Even if there is no body, no corpse in sight, one can do this just sitting quietly, just making that thought very clear in one's mind. "I am going to die. I am going to die and I am going to have to leave everything behind, every single thing, every mortal being is going to be left behind."

Now remember the purpose of this. It is to force the mind to come to terms with this reality. Quite often you will feel fear. There is still fear because you haven't accepted it yet. That's the purpose of the contemplation: to allow the fear to arise so that we can learn to transcend it, to get above this fear and to be able to acknowledge death without fear.

Buddhist monks see a great variety of life. People often think the opposite, that because we're monks we're removed from the realities of life, that we're protected and sheltered, that we live in a remote realm where we don't really know what life's about. In a certain sense that may be true, but in another sense we have more contact with many aspects of life than most people do. This is because the role of monk within a community of people is to act as a spiritual guide and refuge. When there's a birth, everybody brings the baby to the monk and he gives a blessing. The monk experiences what it is for everyone to be happy. When someone is sick: 'Get the monk.' So the monk has very close contact with sickness, pain and fear.

When there is death it is very important for the monk to be there, because most people are terrified of death, both those who are dying and those around them. People feel at a loss: 'What do we do?' As a monk I find that I have many occasions to come into contact with these things, both the pleasant and the unpleasant. I have found death to be one of the most rewarding experiences. I have also found it to be one of the most meaningful ways to be of service to others, because that is the time that I feel most useful. You may think that I feel most useful when I'm teaching meditation or giving these talks, but I really feel most useful in situations where there is death. That is the time when I feel that through my contemplation, through my appreciation of this process called life, I can be a refuge for the dying and for the people around the dying. As I said, it is also rewarding as a learning experience, especially the first few occasions when I had to be with someone who was actually dying.

So there are opportunities for us to contemplate, to bring into the mind this part of life which is normally avoided. Notice if fear arises. If fear does arise, it must be dealt with, we must rise above it. How do we rise above the fear of death? The first thing is to acknowledge its inevitability. Everything, both animate and inanimate, follows the same process. It is just part of life, there is no problem.

It's not that we look forward to it. Some people respond to this with, "Well, if you're not afraid of death, why don't you go and kill yourself?" But we're not afraid of living, either. Just because you're not afraid of something, does that mean that you have to do it?

This rising up and acknowledging is part of life. Inevitably, I'm going to die - everybody, every plant, every tree, every insect, every form, every being, follows the same path. Soon it will be autumn, the leaves fall off the trees. We don't cry, it's natural, that's what the leaves are supposed to do at the end of the season. Human beings do the same thing. We have to rise to this occasion and acknowledge this reality.

Another quality that is very helpful is confidence. Religious people usually have less fear of death than very materialistic people, because for the materialist there is only one life and that is it. Death is zero - finish - kaput! Of course to some people that's quite appealing, but for most people the thought that's it's all gone is not very desirable, in fact it's quite frightening.

But from the Buddhist perspective, death is never seen as the end. From the Buddhist perspective birth is not the beginning and death is not the end. It's just one part of a whole process, a whole cyclic process of birth, death, rebirth, dying again, rebirth, dying again... If one has some appreciation or understanding of that, death begins to lose its sting, because it's not final, it's not really the end. It is only the end of a cycle. Just one cycle along the way and then the way continues with another cycle. The leaves fall off the trees, but it's not the end. They go back to the soil and nourish the roots, next year the tree has new leaves. There's no disappearance into nothing. The same can be said of human life. There are bodies, there are living beings, but death is not the end. Conditioned by the moment of death is rebirth. An appreciation of that helps to relieve a lot of the fear about death.

So we bring up the thought of death, we sit and bring it to mind. If fear arises, then we try to rise above that fear so that the mind comes to terms and is at peace with reality.

## **Living consciously**

Now this really does free us up, enabling us to live our lives more fully. The contemplation of death, rather than making us depressed and morbid, can actually help us live our lives more fully, with more joy, with more gratitude and appreciation. If we live our lives as though we were going to live forever, we don't appreciate them. We take them for granted and live in a very foolish and heedless way. We all live in foolish ways, simply because we don't consciously contemplate the fact of death.

How do we live our lives in foolish ways? Just consider how much time we waste. For a start, how much time have we wasted today worrying about next year, about the next twenty years, thinking about the future, so that we are not fully living this day: "I'm looking forward to Wednesday. Then two more days to go... Thursday, Friday... then it's Saturday. I'll go to the football, the cricket. Sunday morning... meditation at the Buddhist Society. Great, I'm really looking forward to that."

That's the mentality of our Australian society. Five days of the week are spent waiting for the weekend. So you live two days out of seven. Most people just endure five days of the week. From nine to five is a dreary existence, then in the evening they live for a couple of hours. We don't really appreciate life. We don't live our lives fully. We take it all so much for granted, as if we're going to make it till Saturday. You may not make it till Saturday! I may not make it till Saturday. If you or I really aren't going to make it till Saturday, we'd better make the best of today.

This is how the contemplation of death helps to break this habitual way of living, where we take so much of life for granted, constantly overlooking the present and looking to the future. That is one of the foolish aspects of the way we live when we're not contemplating the reality of death.

Another, which is even worse, concerns some of the things we do to each other. We can be very cruel and mean, holding on to hatred and resentment: "Oh well, let him stew for a few more days." Or: "Let her suffer for a few days, I'll apologise next Sunday." We do a lot of things to each other in unskilful ways in the expectation that next time we can fix it up.

"Next week, next month, I'll smooth it over." But what if there is no next month, no next week? What if there is no tomorrow? Suppose you have an argument today? You may die tonight, she may die tonight. You really wouldn't want to part having some terrible argument as your last memory, would you? It's better to apologise now before it's too late.

You see again how we take for granted that there is always going to be a tomorrow. "But," you say, "I'm sure I'm not going to die tonight." Well, maybe not tonight, but one night or one day. It is so uncertain. It really is uncertain, you really don't know - 200,000 die today, tomorrow another 200,000. There is no guarantee that it won't be one of us.

Has this every happened to you? You say, "I'll have to go and see so-and-so," taking it for granted that you will be able to see them. This happened to me with the person whose skeleton now hangs in the meditation hall at Wat Pah Nanachat. The skeleton is of a lay-supporter who used to come to the monastery, but then she developed cancer, which caused her a great deal of suffering. I used to visit her regularly, and one day I had intended visiting her as I was coming back from the town to the monastery, but I thought, "Oh, not today, maybe tomorrow." I was feeling a bit tired, so I thought I'd visit her in a few days time. She died, and I really regretted that I hadn't dropped in. I had assumed that she would be around the day after. That can happen to all of us. If we really recognise that, if we can bring that consciously into our minds, it can help us live our lives a little more wisely, by not leaving unfinished business, negative experiences, resentment, hatred and conflict to linger.

I've seen this in practice. For sixteen years my father and I were not on good terms. He resented my wearing this robe and was very unhappy being unable to come to terms with it. He'd also had an argument with his brother, before I was born, and they had not spoken to each other since. My father's brother lived in Italy and the feud between them started before my father left Italy. They wouldn't speak to each other at all, and this went on for thirty or forty years. Then one year my father changed quite radically, quite drastically. One of the factors for this change may have been something I said to him. I said, "If you are not going to change your view about me, then you're going to suffer for the rest of your life, until the day you die." I think that had quite an impact, as he was getting old. At that time he was 74 or 75. He recognised that he was going to die, it became a conscious reality.

So he decided to set his home straight. He made peace with me. He went to Italy and resolved the argument with his brother that had been going for forty years. He settled all the financial matters that had been left pending for about fifteen years or so and he came back. I remember him saying to me, "I don't want to die with any of these unfinished things on my mind. I want to die peacefully."

That's the effect of contemplating the reality of death. It makes us live more wisely, resolving these unfinished matters. Don't let them linger: the fights, the hatred, the conflicts, the feuds, the debts, whatever. We have the chance, let's get it in order. That's very important. That's a benefit of contemplating death, it affects the way we live our lives. We live them more fully, with gratitude. We don't let things linger on, we don't leave unfinished business.

And our values in life will change. What is important in life? What is motivating you? What is the drive in your life? If we really contemplate death it may cause us to reconsider our values. It doesn't matter how much money you've got, you can't take any of it with you. It's true about everybody, about every religion. You can't take anything at all with you. Whether you have a million dollars or just ten cents, you can't take it with you. Your own body has to be left for others to dispose of in one way or another, it's just refuse left behind. You can't take your body with you, you can't take your wealth with you, you can't take your cars or your houses with you; we can't even take our Buddhist temples with us. That should make us consider how important these things are to us. What is important in our lives then? Is there anything that we take with us? What do we take with us? What is important?

Maybe the quality of life is more important than material acquisitions. The quality of life is primarily the quality of our minds. How we are living today may be more important than a lot of these other things. Considering that the Buddhist perspective of death is not the end, but the condition for rebirth, and that rebirth is conditioned by death and the quality of the mind, there is one thing you take with you. There is one inheritance that you don't leave behind for others:

I am the owner of my kamma, heir to my kamma, Born of my kamma, related to my kamma, abide supported by mykamma. Whatever kamma I shall do, for good or for ill, of that I will be the heir.

That is all that follows, the qualities that we develop within us, the qualities of mind and heart, the spiritual qualities, the good or bad qualities. This is what we inherit. This is what conditions rebirth and shapes the future. So again this gives rise to a new value in our lives. The contemplation of death may change our values. Then we

may not think it so important to strive so hard to make that extra million. We may not live long enough to enjoy it; we may as well enjoy the million we've already got, living more peacefully and starting to build up some spiritual qualities. It can have a very good effect on the way we live our lives and on the values we develop. It's not just a matter of being successful, it's how we become successful. What we're developing within us is more important than becoming successful.

I was giving a talk the other evening to a group of people. In the audience there were quite a few young people and a question was asked about the relevance of Buddhism in this competitive society. I said I don't mind competition, I think competition is good. As long as competition doesn't mean abandoning your humanity, competition is fine. However, it should not be at the expense of your humanity, of the humane qualities of virtue and compassion. You can still compete, you can still strive, but not at the expense of these qualities, because ultimately these are more important. They are your true inheritance. Whether you succeed in getting that business deal or not, whether you make that \$100,000 or not, whether you get that new car ten thousand dollars cheaper or not, seems so important in the short term. Ten thousand dollars is a lot of money, but if you have to do that at the expense of your humanity, your moral principles, your virtue and your compassion, it's not worth it, because you'll have to leave the money behind sooner or later - perhaps sooner than you expect. Your only inheritance is the quality of your mind.

This contemplation of death can help us to live our lives with more gratitude, with less fear, with more immediacy and with values that are really important. That is why we encourage contemplation of death and the process of dying.

## Dying peacefully

Having considered all of this, if dying becomes no longer a contemplation but an actual experience, we can face it without fear. Not only can we face it without fear, we can also do a lot towards dying a good death. If we have led a good life, dying is easier. But regardless of how we have lived, we can still endeavour to die a good death. To help in the dying process, we stress very much the development of the same quality of fearlessness. Death is not to be feared, it's just natural.

The fear of death is often connected to the fear of pain. For many people it's more the fear of pain and the fear of separation from all that is loved that is fearsome. At the time of dying encouragement and reassurance are essential. For a start you need to reassure yourself. The pain is difficult to bear, but we are fortunate in that modern medicines make it possible to reduce the amount of physical pain a human being has to experience at death. Pain need not be such an overwhelming object of fear.

I usually reassure a dying person, such as someone who has cancer, that they won't be allowed to suffer, that they won't have to endure excruciating pain, that they will be given medicine. They certainly should be given medicine to alleviate the pain. An important result of this is that they can relax and die more peacefully.

The other worry is the separation from loved ones, from one's possessions. Of course, if we've contemplated this before, it's a lot easier. We know that to come together implies separation. That's all life is, a meeting and a separation. I came to Melbourne two months ago, in a few days I'll be leaving. That's just the way it is. If we contemplate that, it won't be so frightening to us. If a dying person hasn't done this kind of contemplation, then you need to gently encourage and reassure him or her that the children and those left behind will be taken care of. They need to be reassured that it's all right, that there are friends to take care of them, they need to be encouraged to relax and be peaceful, not to worry about other things, that they'll all be taken care of.

The whole emphasis is on trying to encourage the dying person, be it oneself or another, to become more peaceful. How can you die a good death? By becoming more peaceful. The Buddhist way is to try and maintain an atmosphere of peace in the room where someone is dying. It's not very good to have people shouting and screaming, waving and crying and tugging and pulling. What does that do to the poor person who has this very important thing to do, to die? They make it very difficult to die peacefully. Give those present time to become quiet. It is good if friends and relatives are present, people who can show by their presence that they care, that they love, that they are willing to let go, to reassure, to offer support - that's enough.

Symbols are very useful. If the dying person is a Buddhist, then a Buddha statue, and possibly the presence of Buddhist monks, soothing words and teachings to allow the person to give up their life with the greatest peace and dignity, is very beneficial. It's a wonderful thing for them to move into their new life in the best possible way.

So these are some reflections with regard to death and dying. There are many other aspects to this topic that I could cover but I don't want to go beyond my allotted time. There are a few stories from the Buddha that illustrate very much what I've been saying. The classic one, which I tell at every funeral, is the story about Kisagotami, a woman who lived during the time of the Buddha. She had a baby son of whom she was very proud. Now this little boy got very sick and died. Kisagotami was so disturbed, so distressed by his death that she became a little mentally unhinged. She could not accept the fact that her baby had died. "No, it's only sick, I need medicine. I have to have medicine to cure my baby." She went from place to place, from home to home, from friend to friend, but no one could help her. They told her the baby was dead, but she couldn't accept this and kept asking for medicine.

Finally she went to the Buddha because she had heard that he was a spiritual teacher with great psychic powers. She asked the Buddha, "Please give me some medicine to cure my baby." The Buddha said, "Put the baby down here, I will cure your baby provided you can get a few mustard seeds for me. But you must get these mustard seeds from a home where there has never been a death."

So she went running off into the town and went to the first house, where she asked for mustard seeds. Being a common commodity of little value they were promptly offered to her. As she was about to accept the mustard seeds she asked,

"Has there ever been a death in this home?" Of course the reply was, "Oh yes, only a few months ago so-and-so died." She went from home to home and the experience was exactly the same. This gradually had an effect on her.

When she came towards the end of the village realisation finally pushed through her demented state of mind: death is everywhere; in every home there is death. Death is part of life. She was able to recognise this fact and come to terms with reality. She went back to the Buddha who asked her, "Kisagotami, did you get the mustard seeds?" "Enough of mustard seeds, Lord," she replied, and took her baby and cremated it. She came back and became a Buddhist nun and not long afterwards became enlightened.

I like this story because it represents the Buddhist approach to death. Rather than bringing the baby back to life, the Buddhist way is to acknowledge the reality of death. Being a reality, it must be accepted. We don't look for death, but we don't fear it; we don't ask for death, but we're willing to accept it when it comes. Through the understanding that comes from this contemplation of death, we can live good lives with skilful values, with true appreciation, and we can die a good death, peacefully.

from the book "True Freedom", published by: Buddhadhamma Foundation; 87/126  
Tesabahl Songkroh Rd, Lad Yao, Chatuchak, BANGKOK 10900, THAILAND. All  
Rights Reserved, for free distribution 2004