

# 2019-03-18: Foundations of Mindfulness

## Part 7 - Contemplating Death

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### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, contemplation, death, bones, conceit, decay, corpse, contemplate, thought, attachment, felt, emptiness, die, meditation, mind, big, dead, nice, skeleton, stories

### SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Dharma talks might not be so safe because I'm going to talk about corpses today. So, hopefully some of you knew that was coming. The So, turns out that in a number of religious traditions, some of the people who are devoted themselves to serious a life of serious practice, usually people consider it to be monastics will adopt a practice of looking death, right in the eye, not avoiding it. And in Catholicism, it's called momentum Mori, remembering death. And there's all kinds of wonderful little stories of Catholic monks and Maybe nuns who, who will do several various kinds of death contemplations one of them that I've found is not that I want to do this, but somehow I find that evocative is they have this little room where they live monastic cell, I guess. But now in the corner of the room, they have that coffin, they're going to be buried in. And so they see no, that's, that's where I'm going. And recently, I was looking to read a bit more about green burials. And there's a green burial site and Marine, someone I know went there to see it. And they had they said they had a really beautiful What do they call Do they know what like when you put a sheet over someone who's dead? shroud? Yeah, really beautiful shrouds, and that's what beautiful shroud I thought, what maybe I should get a beautiful shroud, the shroud that the shroud that I'll get somehow buried or burned in or something and I hang it on my wall at the retreat center. For the Romans just kind of kind of my room there. So in that room with the retreat center where I'm at the retreat, because of kind of that's and Buddhist monastics also will do death contemplations, and sometimes they'll go to the morgue. Sometimes they'll go to cemeteries. Sometimes they'll go and watch open cremations of bodies. Sometimes they'll no go to an anatomy labs and cadavers and medical centers and just just to kind of really face the said yet, excuse me. And so the idea is to somehow contemplate this very central existential issue of death. And look at it right in the eye. And many people who are not kind of devoted their life to that kind of lifestyle, easily avoided. They're, you know, we're busy, too busy for dying, you know, too busy for looking at it. Then too. You No and we're to be involved in the world and, and it's also consumed like a downer to contemplate it. But it's not meant to be a downer for people do it to suppose to somehow

have very powerful effect in a beneficial way people's lives. In the modern era, a book that's been very popular is Stephen Levine's book one year to live it's not exactly looking death in the same way with having your coffin in your room or a skull on your next to your next to your pillow when you're sleeping or something. It's But still, it is somehow contemplating this essential fact that we all have that we're going to die. And what does that what life does that cast on our life? How do we reflect on our life? How do we think about it? What's important priorities? And so there's a lot a lot of I'll say more about the benefits of this contemplation of death, but it's a very common thing to do. In this particular texts that I'm teaching these days about the satipatthana sutta, discourse of the four foundations of mindfulness. There's a series of nine contemplations on the decay of a corpse. And I told my wife this net dinner

I think she asked what I was going to teach you about. And my wife hikes a lot. She's a big hiker, she's about to leave for the to the, for six months to walk the Pacific Crest Trail from Mexico to Canada. So you know, she's a serious hiker. And, and she said, Oh, if you're a hiker, you see decaying corpses all the time. You know, the animals and insects and birds and all this stuff. There's if they're dead on the side of the trail or in the trail and, and their various states of decay, she said, You see More time if you said it like completely like it was a natural everyday kind of thing. This is what you see this is what is there. And then we went out down to our little garden and we have a kind of strawberry bed and that's been sitting over winter and so we were kind of needed to be cleaned up and what that means is that all the old dead strawberry leaves, which are kind of matted underneath what's still alive, they need to be removed because otherwise the strawberries will when they grow they'll sit on this matted rotting leaves and rot themselves. So we started pulling out the old rotted, you know, dead leaves. And she said you see here too, is it the decaying corpses now strawberry plants so she kind of put it all in the same category, human decay and the you know, it's all a natural part of natural world. One of the most famous Buddhist monks teachers in 20th century was a monk named Buddhadasa. And, and he lived much of his life kind of outdoors. I mean, he had a house we put in place he lived in the monastery, but he, you know, mostly had a table outside and chairs outside and he would meet with his monks outside and they wouldn't have any indoor Dharma talks. They would have them all outdoors in the woods. Except it does rain there a lot. So they had one place they had in the monastery, they had this very big, it mostly like you know, pillars with a roof on it and so all the sides were open. I guess they went there. Sometimes it was raining a lot. They could give talks or meditate together or something. And hanging from the rafters were two skeletons. So, and one of them said it was a little sign At the bottom hang from the feet. It said, Miss Thailand 1932.

So I don't know, you know, mostly Mandarin laughing. So you know, I guess the monastics who came in there to meditate and hear Dharma talks that you know, that was there it was there definitely for some kind of teaching purpose and you can imagine maybe what it is. And but his instructions for when he was, when he died, was simply be put out in the forest. It was his last gift so that the monastics the people there could come and meditate by the corpse and watch it over the days and the weeks watch it decay, that that was something he thought was benefit would be beneficial for them, to see this natural process that we all part of and, and to really They face it and look at it and be with it.

Certainly not to depress them, but to actually inspire their practice to inspire. They're looking deeply at themselves. And when he didn't get his wish, because this is the danger if you become famous and revered, you don't get left alone the forest took decay. So he had a huge, you know, the king came, I think it was a big event and he had to have the full, full high church, cremation and everything. The so in the ancient texts the suit does. The Buddhists it gave a number of reasons why people would contemplate death. And one of them was to not be too enamored with the physical body. And there are a few people here and there who are a little bit inebriated. Maybe not their own body but other bodies. And so that can kind of will put different perspective on things, for some people and usually considered to be kind of an emergency medicine for certain lustful type people, is to contemplate the corpses. So you know, if you're that kind of person, maybe it's good medicine. The other reason is that it is meant to help overcome a particular kind of conceit. And so anything that overcomes conceit when we're too wrapped up in ourselves caught up in ourselves, we somehow think we're special. So a lot of attachment to the I mean myself, that goes on and causes a lot of suffering for human beings. And more, more maybe, maybe more important than causes suffering. It keeps us from being free. And freedom is one of the great things to really experience freedom. And so, with a particular conceit, that It was emphasized for this contemplation of death is a kind of very innocent conceit. Because usually we think of conceit in Buddhism, as I'm worse than people, others, I'm better than others, or I'm equal to others, which is kind of fascinating. In English, we're using conceit means you're better than everyone else. But in Buddhism, thinking you're worse than others is also a kind of conceit as a kind of way of getting attached to who you are. And then the idea that you're equal to others, I mean, this is United States after all. And you're not even supposed to see yourself as being equal. That's a good See, too. So what's left? What's left is you don't compare yourself to anyone. And that's where there's freedom to be found. And, and so, but the conceit of that is not that kind. The conceit is the conceit of I Am, of emptiness. And that's a pretty basic, pretty central conceit. You know, that idea people don't think of as conceit but there can be a very Strong, maybe intuitive or felt sense of just the emptiness of my being. And I remember once I was visiting a friend of mine, and his daughter was just beginning to talk a little he had some words and enough words for the word. And, and I pointed squish them. And I pointed to her father and said, Who's that? Daddy? Who's that? Mama? And then I pointed to her, who's that? And she said, I am. And so I said, Oh, no, who's that? And she said, I am. And I'm slow to learn. So, I asked the third time I who, who snapped, and she stood up straight and stood up tall kind of and looked at me and said, I am

I thought that was pretty cool. That was pretty wonderful. You know, I mean, I felt bad about myself, you know, giving money, a name and a limiter and, you know, put her into a box of, you know, you know, wow, you know, just enough just be right. But anyway, as wonderful as that is, and we all wish it all alone, you have for all of you to have that. It can be a very deep attachment, clinging to even that sense of emptiness. It can seem pretty ultimate, pretty wonderful, pretty essential, pretty universal, pretty something. But there can be subtle and subtle doesn't mean minor, subtle, very attachment to even that sense of emptiness that we hold on to and it's important. And Buddhism ultimate freedom, freedom of Buddhism, goes beyond even that sense of I am or emptiness and so there's contemplation of death somehow supposed to do that. The other reason for the contemplation of

Death sometimes is, especially certain certain forms of death meditations, Buddhism is to develop concentration to get concentrated. And one of the purpose of concentration and then is to add insight. And purpose of insight is to help us let go of our clinging our attachments in some deep way. And, and so there's death contemplation in this text, I'm going to read you, I think of it as a guided meditation. And it's presented kind of as if it's a reflection, or in a visualization. I think it probably works best if a person can visualize what's being described. And think of it as a journey. And you follow it, follow the journey along, you pulled along, and both they get concentrated, but also, it's a journey from something that's more complicated, something more simple. And that's one of the classic ways that Buddhist meditation unfolds, we go from the complicated life of urban city things, all these things in mind gets quieter and quieter. And our perceptions we think about gets simpler and simpler and simpler. And that the more peaceful we get, the more simple our concerns are. And the more simple is our perceptions of what's going on. You know, there was a car that just went by, and wow, I went to a car that was that was a nice sound, I need to have a nice, tiny, tiny car. My mind is not very quiet if I'm having those thoughts. But if I just go, Oh, that was a car. My mind is more peaceful, right? But if my mind goes around, just gotta hear the sound and it kind of vibrates inside. That's kind of more peaceful. So the idea of your mind is more more simple. So I'm taking stories about things anymore. It's not bringing in the past in the future. And so this journey of simple, simple, simple and that in some places the description is almost It is like the mind is like a cord, a rope. And maybe the rope is stretched taught from hell. And the weather, the wind and the rain and it's everything sun beats down on this, this rope and slowly begins to wear away. And as it gets wears away it gets thinner and thinner and thinner and thinner, until at some point, they're just a little teeny little thread holding it together. And then at some point that thread goes in there in the end, the rope is free, the rope breaks, breaks or breaks off. And so the same way with a mind that the mind can be taught and tense from our concerns or attachments or fears or desires or lusts, all kinds of things preoccupations. And our core that's you know, that's usually of a court can be not only strong and tough. can be all knotted up. In fact, the Buddha used the word not to describe some of the attachments that we're having in our mind. But as the mind gets us quiet this journey to acquire it are still in our mind. The knots untangle. And the core the rope in the mind, the mind itself kind of gets thinner and thinner and thinner thinking gets thinner and thinner, thinner, and thinking thinking becomes less and less solid and, and our concerns become less and less substantial and things get thinner and thinner and thinner, as the mind gets quieter and quieter, quieter, quieter. And at some point, the equivalent of the rope breaking happens to the mind. Maybe that's not a nice image, but it's a beautiful thing. Because then then the shackles, what ties the mind down has been, you know might be freed from that. So this is kind of a journey of that

Looking at using the contemplation of a corpse, as a visualization or as a reflection, and I imagine that I've never really done this as a meditation practice, I'm talking about something that I just assumed that people do that if people would do this over and over again, as a meditation practice, and memorize it, and be able to kind of really get in the flow of it, and the more we do it, the more concentrated we become. It's more absorbed into practice. And then this idea of this journey becomes more and more easy to do. It's, the mind kind of follows the path over and over again, and then comes

to a place where just things just disappear. So and the last thing I'd like to say, kind of repeating a little bit. How much of this is a natural process that we don't see in our society? Bob Stall who's a teacher in Santa Cruz, we passed my teacher there. He sent me an email this week, just a couple of days ago saying my wife and I, we just went to this new green burial site in Half Moon Bay. And that's getting a little older. And it's a town of There used to be a town called Priscilla. And then now, you know how much as a town anymore, but there was a cemetery and the coastal Land Trust, somehow got ownership of the that holds, you know, 100 year old cemetery, and they're kind of redoing it to become a cemetery again, but a green burial site, and Bob Stall was all excited. He said, my wife and I went there, and that's where we're going to go. And he's really into it because it's ecological. cremation turns out to be not so ecological. A lot of energy and and, and so he was like, delighted, right. Wow. natural process. And then I thought about that and what do I want to go and be buried in the fog? You know, it might not be so nice. I know I had a moment where would I like to be buried and I wonder if I can get away with being buried at our retreat center without work. We buried our cat there. But there's a natural process of decay. We all go through it and our society often doesn't see that and you know, it's kind of hidden from us. We went to someone in our community died this last year. And so I was asked to go to the crematorium and they had a nice chapel in you know, people who are going to do some memorial service to the person who's died and The man was in his cardboard coffin on a kind of altar or something, and we did it a little memorial service. And what was a little unusual for the people who work there crematorium was we all wanted to go back. And as the body was put into the oven, and I'm telling you the story was that, so we all piled into the back. And the, the chapter was kind of nice. But as you go through two little doors and get into the back room, it just looks like a dingy industrial. Kind of crowded. I don't know, boiler room. You know, it was nothing, you know, it's like wow. You think that what it means but what I told him told me is so very rare that anybody wants to be there for that and, you know, do that. We wanted to Be there and be the whole time and, and the spouse who was too long wanted me to push the button to start the fire. So this idea of really being there and that that kind of experience and pasting it and being present for it is very touching and I think very meaningful for some people. And it's a natural process. People die all the time. I was kind of amused, I kind of like this. Maybe it's just a weird humor or something. But, okay, am I talking too much? Today, just going off and all these little ideas that come up. Not avoiding text, but I feel kind of I feel kind of cozy or I feel kind of tender. And so my mind's kind of following these tender memories and ideas that come up. So hopefully, hopefully it's okay with you. So

there was some parody of human life that I read, and the parody was about People who say that, you know, birth, you know, baby was born, it was a miracle. Our babies were born, it was a miracle for sure. You know, but yes, it's a miracle. And it happens, you know, a few million times every day. You know, it's like such a completely natural and ordinary and normal process of birth and death that you know, and we make it this big thing, which maybe we should I don't know, but it is still a normal thing and natural thing. And what happens when we relate to it that way? Does that shift our relationship? Or what prevents us from seeing it that way? And what do we bring wood we pile on with baggage or extra stuff. We pile on these kinds of momentous events that shouldn't be happening, but they seem to happen anyway. So to face this to face death and dying and have a healthy relationship is certainly

part of the value of contemplating death and dying and as I've said here, if few times over the years and recently, we trained people here to be Buddhist chaplains to offer spiritual care in hospitals and hospices in different settings. And every year we take the group to a anatomy lab to see the cadavers. Because it's very important that people that are offering spiritual care and settings where people die, that they have some familiarity and comfort, with death and dying. And so they're able to go see it and then kind of look at their reactions and the responses and, and work with it and kind of see the other side. And so here this is one way to do it. This is to do this contemplation. And I don't know if you want to try to listen to it as a guided meditation. And somehow take it in in a different kind of ears than maybe trying to learn something

To the Buddha here speaking to the big coups because as a monastic, and again, it's tedious a group of people who tend to want to face their existential issues head on big goose as though one were to see a corpse thrown aside and a charnel ground. One, two or three days dead, bloated, livid and oozing matter. That Bhiku compares the same body with the corpse this Body of mine also is, is of the same nature. It will be like that corpse is not exempt from that fate. Again, as though one were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals are various kinds of worms. How Biko compares his own body Thus, this body of mine is of the same nature, it will be like that corpse. It is not exempt from that fate. Again, as though one were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, a skeleton with flesh and blood held together with C news. Bhikkhu compares the same body, with his corpse, this body to is the same nature as the corpse, it will be like that is not exempt from that faith. Again, as though one were to see a corpse that own aside in a charnel ground of flesh, flesh skeleton smeared with blood held together with sinews. And then I'll abbreviate it and then goes on to the next one, a skeleton without flesh and blood, held together with sinews. Or one word to see a corpse disconnected. The bones disconnected, scattered in all directions. Here a hand bone Their foot bone, here a shin bone, their eye bone. Here a hip bone, their backbone, their rib bone. There a breast bone, here and arm bone. There a shoulder bone, here and neck bone. They're a job on here a to their skull. So to be gu compares the same body with that, this body to of mine is of the same nature, it will be like that. It is not exempt from that fate. Again, as though when we're to see a corpse thrown aside and a charnel ground bones bleached white, the color of shells and then see one where the bones are heaped up more than a year old. Then when we're to see, the bones are rotted and crumbled to dust and Bhiku compares the same body with the corpse, this body of mine too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate, it to blow away in the wind.

So, so this is offered in this text as a way of developing strong concentrated mindfulness, that the ability to be really present and aware And then to do have this heightened awareness, which becomes the field or the or becomes the medium through which this simplification process can occur, where the mind gets simpler and simpler as it lets go of its preoccupations and thoughts. But the awareness is kind of like the, the medium in which that can occur. So you want to have this very strong established mindfulness awareness for this to occur. And for some people, the presence and even the contemplation of death is one way to, to, you know, to become present. And after I've done that for

myself, there are times where I've been troubled by things. And at some point, it felt like I was too attached to the whole phenomena that I was troubled by. It just didn't seem it seemed like I was stuck in a kind of a loop of that wasn't so useful. And so then Okay, so then I said, I'm gonna die. And, and I will kind of in my mind's eye, I have a way in my mind's eye of kind of looking death right in the eye. And so it's called a debt, you know, and so, and that kind of cleared things up, and then it was easier to kind of move on. So what was that like for some of you to hear that? Because I'm very curious about you know, I offer you some ideas of how this has beneficial. But what was that like? And was anything beneficial of somehow going along that journey of those, that decaying corpse? I'm curious to hear from some of you. And it doesn't have to be big it could be small thing.

Yeah, felt like death a company life right here right now.

With some perfect perception involves

looking into the future.

Say the last part.

felt like there was some perception involved with it.

looking toward the future, your future? Yeah.

yours too.

Really? Now you're telling me I thought I was the one who was exempt. Someone else please. Thank you, Bill.

I just have a very short story to tell the close. Closer. Yeah, this is good now. Yeah. Okay. I was traveling a historic town in Portugal some time ago and visited a very I have gorgeous Catholic church. And next week, there was a somewhat large room that we were encouraged to visit

full of skeletons.

Yes, skeletons is Cole's bones of all sizes and shapes. But the most amazing thing was the play that was on top of everything itself of course in Portuguese, but something like that. We the bows who are here for yours, we are wait.

I thought that was kind of

creepy. I didn't feel very

comfortable at all.

I took my 14 year old son to a church in Rome, where it was like that was a seller was big, big seller. And they're all these bones but they were. They were arranged artistically. It was beautiful. What you can do what you can do with bones is if you're an artist quite something, and I mean it and they were doing it for hundreds of years. So it's kind of really it was layers and layers and

layers and layers and shelves and shelves up to the top.

So why don't how was it meditation? There through?

So I found that very relaxing, actually. And we're sort of visualizing as you were talking. And towards the end of the meditation, just this strong sense of being part of nature. Hmm,

very nice. Thank you. Somebody else? Yes.

Yeah.

I was appreciated this because in a way I wanted to do this and I in the meditation The fact that it was repeated, you know, you're looking at this idea and then it's repeated again and it's me. Yeah. Or you were sort of help bring it home. It also seemed that Yeah, by the end, it was sort of like being I don't know if it's George Oh, key for what just out of the desert with bones. It was quite beautiful. I mean, it seemed at that point.

Not me so much. Nice. Nice.

And that's kind of also the direction of the meditation practice. As he gets simpler and simpler. It's not me anymore. It's nature and

it's only been in the last two years that I have felt like my parents are starting to dictate A bit. And I don't think about it a whole lot, I think mostly because I don't want I don't want to. But this, your talk tonight and the meditation both have given me a little bit of a sense of humor about that. And a grounding like, yeah, it's totally fine. And it's not really a big deal. Like I can be really attached to it. Sort of what you were saying about the miracle of life, you know, babies born, somebody died. And that it's just, it's, it's not just normal is I guess the wrong word, but it's commonplace. Yeah, yeah. Put some ease with it.

Great. Great. I appreciate what you said very much. It was very significant, and I appreciate it. And, and I want to respond. With lots of respect and seriousness and what might sound like cold humor as well. On in the last couple of years, you realize your parents are dead. King you're no spring chicken.

They were really young when they had Yeah, but you're you're you're on your way to

slowing down. I'm not the king. Oh,

fair enough.

I think Bill started it. So it's please. Now no one's gonna dare say anything. I appreciate hearing all this. I'd love to hear some more comments.

Well, I've reached the age when starting to have physical health problems. And recently my brother. He told me that it was scaring him because he always thought of me as being invincible.

And these experiences you know, I'm the rock and the rock is chipping away

it'd be weird if it wasn't.

I know but I, I thought I was invincible to

old age and death, decay and death are not mistakes. They're not mistakes. Her invincible, changes invincible. to maybe we have time for one more someone would be so kind. I appreciate yes bill.

I do love the Satipatthana sutta

And, you know, I never tire of hearing that part of it that you read. And part of me knows, you know, I need to be reminded, get used to the idea, no big deal.

But I'm pretty resistant.

I think hearing stories doesn't isn't going to help me Let go so much.

And what would

I've got all these books and articles and essays I want to ride gotta live long enough to finish them in their big long involve projects and get them published in my name and beyond them, so forth and so on. And

I think if I could let go of all that

I'd be a lot more fearless

or not. I do. I think they're good. Good things. Right. People would like them find that useful, I think. But, but but they get in the way for me, as far as reading goes, is concerned. Yeah, so I so when it comes to practice, I've got divided loyalties. I haven't divided loyalties. I've got my book and article projects and then I've got the practice and they aren't meshing so well.

Well, he said beginning that the stories are not going to do it for you. And then you talked about, you know, you have to maybe you should be more fierce. I think that if you want to do this process here, you're gonna have to get serious until you're serious is not going to work

about practice.

Okay,

so thank you. I hope it was as nice for you as it has been for me to be here with you and to kind of talk about this, and so, we'll continue next week in this text and it gets much safer next week. Thank you