

How to Think About the Impermanence of Death In Order to Live Life Well

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Lama Atisha, in his *Lamp on the Path*, takes from all the extensive teachings of the Buddha on impermanence and gets us to contemplate the grosser level of how things change, in particular our own death. And coming organically and naturally from the previous contemplation, which is to think about the preciousness of this life and the wish not to waste it, his reasoning is to increase our wish not to waste it by realizing that it will end, and could end at any moment.

So let's look at the framework Atisha would recommend that we use to contemplate death, my own death.

1. DEATH IS DEFINITE

The first point is that death is definite. Intellectually, we know it, but emotionally we cling instinctively to a strong sense of being permanent, unchanging. Intellectually it's clear to us; emotionally we're living in denial of it. And remember across the board, what Buddha is saying is, we have within our mind a whole series of misconceptions about how we *think* things are, but in fact we're not in touch with *how* they are.

Everything is impermanent. There's not a single thing in the existence of the universe that is a product of cause and effect that doesn't change. The very nature of cause and effect is that things change. In fact the subtle level of impermanence is the very coming into being of something, inherent in *that* is the passing away of it. You can't have one without the other. You can't have anything that exists that is within the process of cause and effect that doesn't change, that doesn't come and go. Come and go. Come and go.

So okay, death is definite. How you contemplate this, how you think about this. . . When you hear about somebody dying, your

first response is, "Oh!" We're so shocked. "But I just talked to them yesterday!" So that thought is coming from the misconception that somehow instinctively we thought that they were permanently alive, you know. Lama Zopa Rinpoche says, we think, "I am a living person, I'm a living person. And Mary, I talked to her yesterday! She was a living person, how could she have died?" We're shocked.

When we think of someone who is sick, however, we think "Oh, she's a dying person." Look how we talk about dying people, in hushed tones. We look at them sadly, "Oh, how are you?" We talk about Aunt Mary only in relationship to her dyingness, the sickness; she's no longer a real person, is she? She's a dying person. You don't even want to include her in parties. And this is because we have this misconception that somehow this dyingness is something that defines her, whereas livingness defines me. As Lama Zopa says: "Living people die before dying people every day."

Look at the silly way we talk, an indicator of our misconceptions. "Oh I feel so alive," we'll say. Meaning we feel very good. Well excuse me, happy people die. You understand? Healthy people die. Young people die. We might think, "Well, I'm not going to die yet. I'm not old." And you keep adjusting that, don't you? I mean, when I was 40, 61 was old. Now, 80 is old. Where is Betty? Betty is old, she is 75. Aren't you?

Betty I'm 74! Unless you add a year for the Tibetan calendar then I'm 75.

Okay, Betty is old, she's 74. But she doesn't think she is old. She probably thinks her grandmother is old or somebody who is 85 is old. So we all just keep adjusting because we don't like to put ourselves into that category. Dying people are over there, old people are over there, because we have this deep instinct of grasping at permanent me, a living me.

So we've got to face reality. "What do you mean: 'Face reality?'" We think fantasies are nice. Well, Buddha says fantasies have got us into big trouble. It's a fantasy to think I won't die. Not because he's trying to be cruel and

sort of rub our noses in death. But he is saying that given our consciousness is a continuity that didn't begin at the time of conception, and given that it will continue, and given that everything we say, do and think will leave seeds in the mind that will bring future results that will be my experiences – this is the view of karma – then it just makes a lot of sense that death is an extremely important moment in your life. Because it's going to be a transition from this body to another body. It's a bit of a scary transition. We should be used to it, we've done it a million times, the Buddha says. But we're not mentally used to it because we're clinging so powerfully to this one.

And we cling to everything so mightily – Grandma's cup: it's so precious, you've got insurance on it and it's up there and so dear to you and you look at it every day. But its nature is to break, you can't avoid that. But we live in denial of that because we've imposed all of this beauty and marvelousness and value onto it. And so look what happens when it does break. You have a mental breakdown. You live in denial and you start freaking out. You've got to blame, you've got to sue somebody and it's so painful. And then we think we're suffering because the cup broke.

We think we suffer because the person died. It's not true. We suffer – and this is Buddha's point – because we have a fantasy that it won't break, because we have a fantasy that she shouldn't die. In other words, we're not seeing reality. Across the board this is how Buddha is talking. We are not facing reality. We don't see things as they are. We live in denial of things. We are not only not seeing how things are, we're imposing a fantasy onto it.

So this simple meditation here we are trying to do: using Buddha's view of what's real, we're giving it a go, we're thinking about how he says things are and attempting to make that the way we think, in order to argue with ego's entrenched mistaken views. So it's a practical reason.

I mean even when we think of a person who's dying, we think *that's* permanent. A friend of mine and her husband, they split

up, and then he was diagnosed with some virulent cancer and was going to be dead in a couple of months, she went back to him to help him die. Well excuse me, he didn't die! She kept waiting! Two months later, three months later, then six months later he's still alive. So she had to leave him again. He was a dying person and he didn't die. And now two years later he's totally alive, he's a living person again.

So death is definite and it's something that is just natural. When we hear that Mary died, it reminds us; surprise is not relevant. That's the way to think about it. "Wow, Buddha is right. Death is definite, there's nothing certain. Wow, look at that." Everything that comes into being necessarily dies. But because of the ego-grasping, this primordial misconception, because of massive attachment, the main voice of the ego, we frantically don't want to disappear. We want to be me. So we can't bear to think that I will change, that I will die. So we have this big fantasy.

Intellectually it would be silly to argue with it: "Oh of course I'm not going to die!" We know we will. But emotionally it's like that. We might as well say we're not going to. That's why we're shocked. Death is definite.

A simple way to bring this into our lives is every time we see or hear about someone dying – a person, an ant, our pets – remember that it's natural: death is definite. And the real way to make it tasty is to think, "That'll be me one day. I will die too."

2. THE TIME OF DEATH IS UNCERTAIN

The second point, getting closer to home now, is the time of death is not certain. So even though we do factor in death to some extent – we have insurance policies and pensions, we organize our funeral, we make our will – still, even if we're old, we haven't scheduled death in, have we? "Well next week is the dentist, and the week after that is death." Or even five years' time. We can plan vacations even in five years, but we don't schedule death. No way, because even though we do know we will die, that death is definite, we don't like to think that the time of death is uncertain. Why? Because I still feel

like a living person. How can I be dying next week? Not possible. I feel alive.

So the time of death is obviously uncertain. We all know we're going to die. But then if I ask each one of us, "Okay, stick it into your schedule. Come on, do a ten-year schedule now, work out your schedule for your life, your plan. Now factor death in please" we'll think it's a joke.

And, of course, we don't know when we will die. That's the point. We vaguely know it'll be some time in the future. It's a logical fact that if I know I will die and I don't know when, then I could die today, couldn't I? But we laugh if we say that. It's an instinctive belief. "Of course I won't die today. Tomorrow? Of course not. Next week? No, come on, don't be ridiculous!" There is a story about a Tibetan astrologer, who had done his own chart, and according to the chart he was going to die today. His own chart. He sat there thinking about it, "Where did I make a mistake?" He was totally convinced he was wrong. And what happened was, while he was trying to work out where he had made the mistake, convinced that he was wrong, the story is that he had this pokey thing and he was playing with it in his ear while he was thinking. And the window shutter blew open and it hit him and he pierced his ear and he died. He died that moment. But the immediate impulse was, "Of course it's a mistake. How can I die today?"

And any one of us if we dared to think that thought and really go into it and make a meditation out of it, to use our creative imagination, it's too scary to us, we don't want to go there, because we can't bear the thought that we could die. And then to do the processing we'd have to do, like the people up on the hundredth floor of the World Trade Center, think of the vivid stories, and the wives and husbands talking to each other, and "I love you, I love you," before they were burned alive in that building. I mean you've really got to speed up the process of giving up attachment and recognizing impermanence when you've only got a few minutes. So what Buddha is saying is, we can have the luxury while

we've got this precious life to contemplate these things. To recognize the reality that the time of death really is uncertain.

Most of us, probably Betty can speculate, being 74, that it's possible that she could probably die sooner than a 20-year-old. But there is no certainty. I read about a footballer who died, a 17-year old. Whatever the reason was, he died. Now, believe me, he didn't expect to die. "No way, I'm young. No way, I'm healthy. No way, I'm happy." Fantasy, fantasy, fantasy.

Lama Zopa says, "Best to think, 'I will die today.'" If you really want to practice, best to think, "I will die today." Because then you won't waste your life. That's the point Atisha wants from us by contemplating these things right here, because it will energize us not to waste this precious life, not to waste this opportunity.

And, you think about it: what's the name of the day you'll die? It's "today," isn't it! So we might as well get used to thinking it!

3. WHAT IS IMPORTANT AT THE TIME OF DEATH

And that brings us to the third point, the crux of it. At the time of death, at the moment when this consciousness leaves this body, what is important? What is useful to me in that moment? What will be useful to the consciousness that will leave this body and take another body. What will be useful?

That's not the way we think of death. We think of death as the end, and we see a big black hole that we'll sort of go into that no one knows about. We think of death from the point of view of the observer. We should think about death from the point of view of this consciousness moving forward to another body, another house, you've got to go to another house soon. So it's a bit of a difficult transition, and clearly, the more attached you are to this house, the more painful it is to move.

If we never confronted impermanence, our own, and never thought about death, the definiteness of it, the uncertainty of the time of it, well then that's how death will be, death will be a very scary time.

I remember a friend of mine, Lenny, who worked for years as a hospice worker, she said it's a given that most people die with fear. She said the ones who didn't die with fear were those who had some kind of spiritual path. My feeling is it's not because they're such a high practitioners but because the only people who think about death are spiritual people, Christians, say, because they talk about God or heaven. Materialists, why would we think about death? Because as far as the materialist's view is concerned you disappear when you die, there's nothing left. So there's no reason to think about death. There's no reason to prepare yourself for that event.

If you're a Buddhist you prepare for that event because you're going to move from this body to another one. So it's an important event, it's a very important event that's going to happen in your life: your death. Like moving from your house, you prepare an awful lot for that. Look at the simple things we do that will happen in the future that we have to prepare for. We don't just say, "Oh, when it happens I'll deal with it." That's how we think about death.

We prepare in the most elaborate ways for the smallest things that are going to happen in the future. Especially if you don't know how to do it. Like your driving test. You don't just say, "Oh, when I get to the driving test I'll manage it then." Don't be ridiculous! You've got to train now, you know, it's obvious. It's such a simple point. So if you think of death in this sense, not as some black hole that I will fall into, but as simply a transition. This is the Buddhist approach. From this body to the next. Clearly a very important event to prepare for. And I'm not talking about having your nice coffin, the way people prepare, and the nice plot, out there. We're not discussing that. That's just for your body. By the time your consciousness leaves your body it's just a piece of ka-ka, so don't worry about the body; other people can take care of that. The main point from Buddha's point of view is to prepare internally, to think about your mind.

And how do you prepare for death? It doesn't mean you've got to imagine when

you're dying, although that's helpful. You're not preparing for death by thinking about death. You're preparing for death by knowing about impermanence *now*. How do you prepare for your driving test? By driving a car *now*. It's obvious. How do you prepare for death: by facing the reality of it. And you prepare for death by living our lives in a way that prepares us for death.

The conclusion from this is it's a wakeup call. And that's the point that Atisha's stressing here: to prepare ourselves. In other words change the way we think now and therefore change the way we live our lives, because that's how you prepare for death, that's how you prepare for this event. You put all the steps in place. Like you prepare for the wedding, you prepare for the driving test. You do the steps now and so when the day comes it'll just happen in a natural way.

So this third point is, at the time of death what is it useful to me? Well, there's a few givens here: let's look at them.

Given Buddha's assertion that this consciousness of mine didn't begin at conception and goes back and back and back, and that it will not end at death, will continue just into the future – it's indestructible this consciousness of ours; and **given** that whatever I have said, done, and thought in this life, and in infinite previous ones, necessarily leaves a seed in my mind that just doesn't disappear; and given that seeds ripen in the future as one's own experiences: negative actions of body, speech and mind necessarily leave seeds in my mind that will ripen as suffering and positive actions leave a seed in my mind that will ripen as my happiness in the future; and **given** that I don't want suffering and do want happiness – **given** all this, then it follows logically that at the time of death the only thing that is of any use to me is the positive seeds in my mind. That's it.

The body is useless, it can't help. Princess Diana died at 36. I always think of her. This gorgeous aerobiced body, totally in love, everything is perfect, blissful, blah, blah, blah. She died. So at that moment, the only thing that was any benefit to her were the seeds in her mind from the virtue she had

done in her life. All the rest was worse than useless.

The things that I now see as most important in life, Buddha would say – and you analyze it according to his view and it's clear – they are totally essenceless. The things we do take as the purpose of life, you ask most people, it's almost like a mantra: health and family are the main point of our life. Everyone will say that's the point of life. Well, the Buddha would say we are missing the point because at the time of death if they were so crucial they would be a benefit to us, but they are useless. Your family, your husband, your children, your possessions, your nice house, your nice body, your health, your reputation, money in the bank, all the things we spend all our time worrying about and putting into place because we believe in the propaganda that that's the security we are need, that that's what life is all about; we believe in the materialists' propaganda, which we are part of, we buy into it.

But at the time of death all the things you spend your life thinking are important are of no use. They crumble. There's nothing. We all say at the time of death you can't take it with you, but we treat it like a joke. It's very profound when you really get an experience of its truth.

So if this is true, then I had better prepare now by living my life in a reasonable way now: by trying to remove the negative seeds that I have already planted and by trying to develop the positive ones. This is reasonable, based on these assumptions. So at the time of death, when it comes, I must be ready, I have to be prepared. And the way to be prepared is by having thought about it, therefore, when it comes I'm not shocked because I know it's natural that I die. And I'm prepared because I've lived my life by practicing morality, goodness, by not harming others – at the very least, this.

We don't have to be fundamentalist about it and chuck out the husband, and chuck out the kids, and chuck out the reputation, and chuck out our money, no. Just change the way you see them. Change your attitude towards them. That's the real point. Give up attachment to the house, the family, the body;

give up the jealousy, the fear, the neurosis, the blaming. Because those imprints in your mind will be there when you die and you do not want those. But you do want your virtue and your kindness and your generosity and your patience and your non-attachment seeds to ripen.

So you don't wait until death to do it, it's too late then. Start sowing seeds now. That's how you lead your life. By recognizing that it's going to change, that death is definite, the time of death is completely uncertain, so you might as well be ready when it does come unexpectedly. It won't give a warning: "You've got ten more breaths left Robina, you better get ready." We might have; we'd be lucky. It's actually very fortunate if you get sick before you die, because you've got time to prepare. That's actually really the Buddhist approach. My Buddhist friends on death row have been forced to confront the reality of death, so they can prepare for it. How fortunate.

Refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha

Lama Zopa Rinpoche

MOTIVATION FOR ONE'S LIFE

The purpose of my life is to free all sentient beings from every suffering and to lead them to happiness, especially the sublime peerless happiness of full enlightenment.

Since the enjoyments in my every-day life – all the past, present and future happiness, including enlightenment – are dependent on other sentient beings, the numberless sentient beings' happiness also depends on me.

Because if I generate loving kindness towards sentient beings, then all sentient beings receive no harm from me and they have peace, success. Therefore, I am responsible for all sentient beings' happiness and peace. I must serve sentient beings without discrimination between those who harm and those who help. For the success of this I must achieve full enlightenment. Therefore I am going to put all the actions of my body, speech and mind in virtue: may all these actions not cause the slightest harm and only be of the greatest benefit to all sentient beings so that they will achieve enlightenment as quickly as possible.

GENERAL REFUGE ADVICE

In general, there are four points to the practice of Dharma.

1. One should rely upon holy beings, listen to the holy Dharma and after correctly comprehending, follow the Dharma and practice it.

2. One should not let one's senses become excited (that is, control the senses when in danger of creating negative karma), and take as many vows as one is capable of keeping.

3. Have a compassionate attitude towards sentient beings.

4. Whenever you eat or drink, make effort to offer to the Rare Sublime Ones, and train well in the refuge precepts, including exerting oneself to make offerings to the Triple Gem.

WHAT IS TO BE AVOIDED

1. Having taken refuge in the *Buddha*, one should not take refuge from the depths of one's heart in worldly gods such as Brahma and so on, and one should not prostrate to such objects.

One should not entrust oneself from the depths of one's heart to non-virtuous friends or teachers of non-Buddhist teachings that have no supporting levels.

2. Having taken refuge in the *Dharma*, one should avoid harming any being, either directly by oneself, or indirectly by making others do it for you.

3. Having taken refuge in the *Sangha*, one should avoid entrusting oneself to and keeping company with negative friends and followers of hedonism.

WHAT IS TO BE PRACTICED

1. Having taken refuge in the *Buddha*, with a mind of respect towards them, one should regard even statues as being actual buddhas, prostrate and pay respect to them.

One should avoid showing disrespect to them by, for example, placing them on the bare ground, judging them according to their material value, or discriminating between them, saying that some are good and others bad.

2. Having taken refuge in the *Dharma*, one should pay homage and respect by generating the recognition of all scriptural texts or even just one syllable of the teachings as being the actual Rare Sublime Dharma.

And one should avoid placing them on the bare ground, regarding them as material objects, using them as security for a loan, or carrying them together with one's shoes.

3. Having taken refuge in the *Sangha*, one should regard even one member of the Sangha as being the actual Sangha. One should avoid discriminating within the Sangha community and have equal respect for all.

One should train well in all the advice concerning what is to be practiced, such as not even stepping over pieces of robe or placing them in dirty places, but in clean places instead.

THE LAY VOWS

The five branch vows to be kept by a full *upasika* [*ge-nyen*, “nearing virtue”] are to avoid

1. killing;
2. taking what has not been given;
3. sexual misconduct;
4. telling lies;
5. drinking alcohol.

Of these vows, killing, taking what has not been given and drinking alcohol are very easy to understand.

LOSING THE VOW FROM THE ROOT

One would lose the vow from the root, and so should take it again, if one transgresses these vows by

1. killing a human being;
2. stealing an object that is valuable to another person;
3. engaging in sexual misconduct, that is, engaging in sexual activities with another’s husband or wife or partner.
4. telling a supreme lie, that is, pretending one has attained realizations of the Grounds and Paths even though one hasn’t.

RECEIVING A DOWNFALL

Otherwise, one would not lose the vow from the root but would receive a downfall, which must be confessed, if one transgresses the vows by

1. killing a non-human being such as an animal;
2. stealing an object of no value;
3. engaging in sexual conduct at a holy place, at a special time (for example, the day before full moon, the eighth day of the lunar calendar, Buddha’s special holy days. Etc), or engaging in sexual activity whilst living in the one-day eight precepts [*nyen-ne*, “near abiding”];
4. telling ordinary lies;
5. drinking alcohol (or taking mind-altering drugs)

So, one should confess and abstain precisely, which is the method of purification.

One should protect well with the mind the six remaining non-virtuous actions,

similar in part to the previous negative karmas (that is, close to those heavy negative karmas): avoiding slander, harsh words, gossip, covetousness, harmful intention and wrong views.

BENEFITS OF PROTECTING THE VOWS

The benefits of protecting the vows like this are: you will not fall to the evil-gone realms [hells, animal and hungry ghost]; temporarily you will continuously achieve the body of a *deva* or human, and ultimately you will easily achieve the state of liberation. Furthermore, the virtue of protecting these five vows increases constantly, even while one is asleep or unconscious, intoxicated and so forth.

Also, in addition to these, the Founder (Guru Shakyamuni Buddha) always thinks of you; the gods (protectors beyond sorrow, worldly protectors, devas) praise and protect you; non-humans cannot harm you; your qualities increase limitlessly; and at the time of death you will die without regret. Again, by avoiding killing, you will have a long life in all future lifetimes.

By avoiding taking what has not been given, you will have great wealth (in future lives).

By avoiding sexual misconduct, you will meet with a perfect wife or husband and friends (harmonious exactly according to your wishes) (in future lives).

By avoiding telling lies, you will have a good memory and be conscientious (in future lives).

It is said in the Sutra *The Lamp of the Moon*: “If, with a mind of devotion, one makes offerings of umbrellas, fan-flags, rows of lights, food and drink to as many billions of Buddhas as there are grains of sand in the River Ganges and for that many tens of millions of eons, the merit of this can in no way compare with that of a person who keeps one precept even for one day at the time when the holy Dharma, the teaching of the Gone to Bliss One, perishes.”

Based on teachings from Lama Zopa Rinpoche