

V

DEATH

The third spoke in the wheel of practice presented here, and the last of the three body contemplations, takes up the stages of decay through which a corpse would go if it were left out in the open. The instructions in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* are fairly long, wherefore I here present only an abbreviated version (MN 10):

As though one were to see a corpse thrown away in a charnel ground that is one, two, or three days dead, being bloated, livid, and oozing matter, and one compares this same body with it: “This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.”

Again as though one were to see a corpse thrown away in a charnel ground that is being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals, or various kinds of worms ...

a corpse thrown away in a charnel ground, a skeleton with flesh and blood, held together by the sinews ...

a skeleton without flesh, smeared with blood and held together by the sinews ...

a skeleton without flesh and blood, held together by the sinews ...

disconnected bones scattered in the main and intermediate directions, here a hand bone, elsewhere a foot bone, elsewhere a shin bone, elsewhere a thigh bone, elsewhere a hip bone, elsewhere a back bone, and elsewhere a skull ...

a corpse thrown away in a charnel ground, bones bleached white, the colour of shells ...

bones heaped up, more than a year old ...

bones rotten and crumbling to dust, and one compares this same body with it: “This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.”

The instructions speak of “comparing” our own body to the different stages of decay through which a corpse would go if it were left out in the open. Similar to the anatomical parts, the contemplation itself is not introduced as a form of mindfulness. Actually in the present case the exercise appears to involve some form of visualization. The text introduces the different stages of decay with the phrase “as though one were to see a corpse”. The Pāli formulation leaves the door open for imagination and need not be concerned only with recollecting what we have actually seen.

The way these different stages of decay are presented gives the impression that we might just choose one of them, or alternatively proceed step by step through the entire series. The purpose of this contemplation appears to be twofold. One direction in which to take this practice becomes evident in the *Mahādukkhakkhandha-sutta* (MN 13;

Anālayo 2003: 153f and 2013: 101f). The discourse contrasts the pleasure of seeing a beautiful and attractive young girl to her condition after she has passed away and her body is going through the stages of decay of a corpse, corresponding to those described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. This mode of understanding would make the present exercise similar in its basic orientation to contemplation of the anatomical parts.

RECOLLECTION OF DEATH

An alternative direction in which to take this practice, which is the approach that I will be presenting here, is to take this contemplation as a reflection on the mortality of the body. This to my mind is a topic of such importance that I definitely want to include it in the mode of practice I do myself and teach to others. If I were asked to recommend just one single meditation practice, I would probably opt for recollection of death. This is because of its transformative power.

In our modern society we have become so used to avoiding the fact of death. The different defence mechanisms employed to ignore our own mortality and that of others have been studied in detail in clinical psychology. A range of publications are available on what comes under the heading of Terror Management Theory (TMT). This is the *theory* that explains how human beings *manage* their existential *terror*.

Human beings share with animals the instinct for self-preservation. The case of human beings takes on a special turn because we are aware of the fact that death is unavoidable. The combination of the instinctive drive for self-preservation and the knowledge of the inevitability of death creates the potential for paralysing terror. As soon as death comes within the range of attention, human beings tend to react with various defence mechanisms. The most common ones are trying to distract oneself or else pushing the problem of death into the distant future.

As a consequence of being made aware of their mortality, human beings tend to cling strongly to their views and sense of identity as a way of fending off the feeling of being threatened. Just being briefly reminded of the fact of death makes individuals react in ways that are more narrow-minded and biased, as ways of fending off the realization of their own mortality.

The future Buddha's own search for liberation starts out with

insight into his own mortality as one of the central dimensions of *dukkha* (together with disease and old age). A discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* reports his reflection that others, on seeing someone dead, tend to be repelled by it, ignoring the fact that they are themselves subject to the same fate (AN 3.38; Anālayo 2017c: 5ff). The Buddha-to-be realized the inappropriateness of this type of reaction. He allowed the truth that he was himself subject to the same fate sink into his mind. As a result, all his intoxication with being alive vanished.

According to the *Ariyapariyesanā-sutta* (MN 26; Anālayo 2013: 109f and 2017c: 8ff), together with manifestations of *dukkha* like old age and disease, the fact of death motivated the future Buddha to embark on his quest for awakening. Having successfully attained awakening, the Buddha proclaimed that he had realized the deathless. This is not some form of immortality. His body was still subject to passing away. But he was no longer affected by death, be it his own or that of others. In other words, according to early Buddhist thought, freedom from death can be realized while still alive.

It may well be that the realization of the future Buddha that he was subject to the same fate of death, which then led him to engage in the quest for what leads beyond death, is echoed in the formulation in the instruction given above. The *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* encourages the reflection that we are indeed “of the same nature” and we “will be like that” corpse in various stages of decay. In sum, we are “not exempt from that fate”. These formulations could be employed for reflecting regularly on our own mortality and thereby building a foundation for applying this understanding during actual contemplation.

A PRACTICAL APPROACH

Actual practice can take as its starting point the image of a skeleton. This would be the “skeleton without flesh and blood, held together by the sinews” out of the different stages of decay described above. To begin with, we might simply bring to mind the image of a skeleton (or else another stage of decomposition we prefer). The mental image of the skeleton could be further strengthened if our whole-body awareness, to be practised throughout all the different exercises described in this book, were to be undertaken in such a way that prominence is given to the skeleton. This would build on the way of

practice we did for the earlier two *satipaṭṭhāna* exercises, where with contemplation of the anatomical parts we explored the bones of the skeleton and with contemplation of the earth element we were to some extent still aware of the skeleton as part of our awareness of the solidity of the whole body. The main difference now is that, instead of becoming aware of the skeleton through a gradual sweep, we are simply aware of the whole skeleton inside our body, something with which we are by now familiar.

In this way, what has been introduced as an *object* with the help of a mental image of the skeleton of another now becomes the *subject* of contemplation by being directly related to the skeleton in our own living body. As a result, the fact of death becomes palpably *my* death. This can serve to actualize the reflection that “this body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.”

Needless to say, at the time of contemplation our own body is still alive, whereas a dead body is bereft of any felt sense of the stages of decomposition that it undergoes. Thus the exercise is about making a comparison, it is not about imagining how it feels when our own body falls apart. The purpose is only to drive home the fact that our own body will after death decompose, but that decomposition itself is not something that can any longer be felt.

For those who wish to undertake contemplation in a way that incorporates the entire description in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*, all of the different stages of decay could be brought into the practice. I would personally recommend getting started by working just with a single stage, such as the skeleton. Building on that, those who wish to do so could expand the practice to cover all of the different stages of decay described in the discourse. In what follows I briefly sketch one way in which this could be undertaken. For readers who are relatively new to facing mortality and the stages of decay, it might be preferable to skip over the next paragraph, as the description given in it can be somewhat unsettling.

Visualizing our own body as having just died, we might picture it gradually beginning to bloat and become livid, festering, and oozing matter. The digestive enzymes begin to eat up the stomach and the eyes bulge out. Crows come to pick out the eyes. The nostrils and the mouth are filled with maggots which start to eat the tongue and other

fleshy parts. Maggots also eat their way into the brain. Hawks and vultures tear out the heart and the intestines, while dogs and jackals bite off the genitals and munch away at the limbs. Any remaining flesh on the body, after different animals have feasted on it, rots away. Eventually only the blood-smeared bones of the skeleton remain. The sinews that kept the bones together as a skeleton decompose and the individual bones come to be scattered here and there. The scattered bones bleach, rot, and gradually crumble to dust.



The mode of practice suggested here clearly involves an element of

visual imagination. As mentioned above, the formulation used in the actual instructions in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* speaks of comparing our body to what we would see in a charnel ground, which leaves open the door to an element of visual imagination.

A sense of the extent to which such visual imagination is successful and appropriate can be determined by noting whether it stings our sense of identity with, and ownership of, the body. The stage when animals eat various parts of our body can be particularly effective in this respect.

A related dimension can be cultivated when we are bitten by mosquitoes and ticks. Besides the actual itch, what additionally stings is often the unwelcome sense that our own body is food for others. By contemplating that this is its final destiny anyway, we can diminish and eventually completely overcome this additional sting.

Another interesting stage in the process of decomposition of the corpse comes when the skeleton disintegrates. As long as the skeleton is still held together by tendons, as long as it is still to some extent a compact unit, it looks like a person. Once the tendons have decomposed, however, the scattered bones no longer give rise to the perception of a person. This is similar to the sense conveyed by the butcher simile, mentioned in the last chapter, when the slaughtered cow turns into pieces of meat.

A related observation could be cultivated when hair and nails are being cut. Even though both are already dead matter while on the body, they are still perceived as an integral aspect of “our” body. This quickly changes once they are cut off and to be discarded.

The recommendation to notice whether it stings is of general relevance for *satipaṭṭhāna* meditation, and the present exercise is a particularly useful occasion for exploring the sting. In order to dwell independently and not cling to anything, it is helpful to identify our dependencies and what we cling to. Whenever it stings, wherever there is agitation, it is right there that dependencies and clinging show up. It is right there that an opportunity manifests for gradually letting go of them.

THE BREATH AND IMPERMANENCE

In order to encourage further the facing of death with the present

contemplation, I recommend that another exercise be combined with the vision of a decomposing corpse. This is recollection of death based on the breath. Although this is clearly not part of the *satipaṭṭhāna* scheme, such recollection is described in two discourses in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* (AN 6.19 and AN 8.73; Anālayo 2016: 200ff).

The Buddha had been examining how some of his disciples were practising recollection of death. The different ways of practice they described were all based on pushing death away into the distance. Instead, the Buddha recommended that death should be brought directly into the present moment. We should be aware that we might die right after the present breath. As a practice related to eating, we could also be aware that we might die after having eaten the present morsel. The thrust of this recommendation is very much in line with the findings of Terror Management Theory. A chief defence mechanism against the threat of mortality is precisely to push death away into the distant future.

The contemplation of the corpse in decay can be substantially enhanced by being combined with the awareness that the present breath might be our last. Before going into the details of the practice, however, I need to mention that those with respiratory problems or those with suicidal tendencies should not adopt this practice. Moreover, a recommendation for anyone undertaking recollection of death is to do it very carefully and gradually. By way of illustration, imagine being given a very powerful car just after getting a driving licence. It would be rather foolish to drive that car at top speed on a busy highway. Similarly, with the present exercise it is important not to charge ahead too quickly.

Genuine wisdom is the result of gradual growth and cultivation, not of just trying to force our way through as quickly as possible. A discourse in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* compares the threefold training in morality, concentration, and wisdom to a farmer who plants his crop and waters it in due time (AN 3.91; Anālayo 2003: 253). That much is what the farmer can do, but he is not able to force the crop to become ripe right on the spot. The same patient attitude of planting the seeds of wisdom and growing the seeds of insight by watering them in due time through meditation practice is appropriate for the present exercise (as well as for *satipaṭṭhāna* in general). We do the needful and

allow what we have planted to ripen gradually and eventually bear its liberating fruits. In contrast, to attempt to force our way through can easily become an assertion of the ego and thereby run counter to the balance appropriate for genuine growth of insight. Such a forceful attitude would also conflict with insight into not-self, cultivated with the previous contemplation of the elements.

Becoming aware of the breath takes up a manifestation of the wind element that has already come to our attention with the final stage in the contemplation of the elements. The element on which the body urgently depends for its survival is precisely the wind element (in the form of oxygen supply), the most ephemeral of the four elements. In this way, contemplation of the elements has already alerted us to the precariousness of bodily existence.

We continue with the same theme by combining awareness of the constant flow of oxygen in and out with the recognition that the body's survival depends entirely on the uninterrupted continuity of this supply of oxygen. The breath is what connects us to life. With this form of practice, we are *connecting* with that which *connects* us to life. This connection is nothing but a flow, an arising of a changing flow of air and its passing away. It is so utterly impermanent and insubstantial. Our body depends entirely on this constantly changing process of breathing. How could such a body be permanent? This is impossible.

The present exercise is particularly apt for exploring the nature of arising and passing away in relation to the body. This is the second aspect mentioned in the refrain, which builds on the internal and external dimensions of practice mentioned before in the refrain. These have already been explored with the anatomical parts and the elements. Actually the internal and external dimensions are so self-evident when we contemplate the elements that they can hardly be missed. The same holds for impermanence in relation to the present exercise. It is so self-evident that it can hardly be missed.

Needless to say, impermanence is also relevant to contemplation of the anatomical parts and the elements, just as the internal and external dimensions of practice apply also to the present exercise. In fact the death of others can for some practitioners become a natural entry door into recollection of death. When following this mode of approach,

however, it would still be worth ensuring that this does not become a way of avoiding the facing of our own death.

The present practice involves giving full attention to the cutting edge of impermanence, to the fact that impermanence means that this very body will sooner or later pass away. It is for this reason that this exercise can become a particularly powerful mode of implementing the instruction in the refrain to contemplate the nature of arising and of passing away. The continuity of the body, which so easily is just taken for granted, entirely depends on the constant arising and passing away of the breath. And the breath itself is so palpably impermanent, it is nothing but a changing flow.

This dependency on the breath at the same time exemplifies the empty nature of the body, which had already become apparent with the contemplation of the elements. We are of course to some extent in control over the body; we do take decisions when moving its limbs or positioning it in this way or that way. There is naturally a sense of a temporary degree of ownership and identity. We are able to distinguish between our own body and that of another. But such control and ownership are limited; they operate within a network of conditions of which several are outside the range of our full control and ownership.

We are not in sole and complete control over the body, otherwise the body would just be the way we want it. It would never get sick and certainly not pass away. We are also not the sole and true owners of this body. As mentioned in the previous chapter, elements taken in from the outside in the form of food and drink at some point during this process are experienced as having become “mine”. Yet soon enough some of this intake turns into faeces and urine to be discarded, and whatever remains in the body will definitely leave the sphere of our sense of ownership with death. In this way, death serves to clarify the implications of the impermanent and empty nature of the body.

There will come a time when the breath stops flowing and this body will die. If it were left out in the open, it would go through the stages of decay of a corpse described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*. Having recollected whatever visual image of a corpse we have decided to adopt, with each breath we can become aware that this might be our last breath. The perception arises that we could die even right now, as

a result of which the gradual decay of our own body would start very soon. We cannot be sure that our breathing continues beyond what is happening in the present moment. Once this uncertainty is appreciated, we no longer take breathing for granted.

For actual practice I recommend relating this type of awareness in particular to the inhalation. With every exhalation we can in turn cultivate an attitude of relaxing and letting go, training ourselves in the best way of facing the moment of dying. With these two modes it becomes possible to fine-tune the practice to our personal needs. Adjustments can take place by giving more attention either to the inhalations or to the exhalations. This does not mean changing the nature or length of the breath in any way. Breathing remains natural breathing. The point is solely about where to direct mental attention.

At times the fact of our own mortality does not really sink into the mind. When mindfully noticing this, we can give more emphasis to the inhalations and the fact that this could be our last breath. At other times the mind can get agitated. As we become aware of this, we give more emphasis to the exhalations, to letting go and relaxing. In this way it becomes possible to adjust the practice in such a way that progress can be achieved while at the same time maintaining balance of the mind.

Facing our own mortality through the practice of what I like to call “death-breath”, relating the certainty of our own death to the experience of the breath, is facing ignorance head-on. There is hardly anything else that human beings would like to ignore as much as the fact of their own death. This explains the defence mechanisms identified by research related to Terror Management Theory. It is therefore not at all surprising if this type of meditation practice provokes reactions. It would be unreasonable to expect that things just go smoothly.

The challenging nature of the present practice receives some cushioning through the preparatory work done with the two previous body contemplations. The cultivation of non-attachment through contemplation of the anatomical parts facilitates a lessening of identification with the body, whose empty nature is revealed through contemplation of the elements. Both exercises together engender an attitude towards the body that is less dominated by clinging and a

sense of ownership. This in turn prepares the ground for being able to face squarely the fact that this body will eventually fall apart; it is certainly not exempt from that fate.

Still, the practice will quite probably lead to reactions. A common type of reaction is mental cloudiness and lack of clarity. This is when ignorance manifests its deluding force. At such times, the fact of mortality just fails to impact the mind. The mental reflection seems just hollow phrases and the exercise appears to be meaningless. It is helpful to note that this is just what we would expect. The forces of ignorance have for a long time been in control of the mind. They can hardly be expected to yield right away and just disappear. Instead, it takes the sustained effort of a gradual approach to diminish and eventually emerge from this type of ignorance.

One helpful tool in this respect is giving importance to being in the present moment. This counteracts the tendency of ignorance to turn the practice into something done automatically or by rote. Opening up to the changing nature of present-moment experience helps us to get out of the autopilot mode. Once that has been achieved, awareness of the fragility of this present moment can be introduced by way of recalling our dependence on the breath.

The reflection that the next breath might be the last can be further strengthened by adding another reflection: "Even if this breath is not the last, it is certainly one breath closer to death." We do not know when death will happen but we do know that it certainly will happen. With every breath we are definitely coming closer to the time of our death. The breath right now is one "breath less" until eventually we will be completely "breathless".

There is nothing surprising in this: mortality is the birthday present every human body receives right at the time of coming into existence. Nevertheless, it takes much courage and effort to face what most human beings run away from: death is certain.

Another tool, to be used carefully and judiciously, is to hold the breath. We breathe out and do not breathe in again for a little while. Briefly holding the breath in this way, we soon notice the urge to breathe in again. This helps to bring home to us the precariousness of our physical existence and the uncertainty of being able to take the

next breath.

Holding the breath should not become a continuous form of practice. In other words, the present suggestion is not meant to encourage some form of breath retention. Doing so would risk losing sight of a chief characteristic of mindfulness practice in general, which is uninvolved observation. In relation to the breath this means that the task is to observe the breath as it is, rather than influencing it in any way. To hold the breath once is more like an alarm clock, whose purpose is to wake us up. It would not make sense for the alarm clock to keep ringing all the time. It has fulfilled its function once we wake up. Similarly, when holding the breath once has woken us up to the precariousness of our existence, we continue cultivating awareness of that precariousness with normal breathing as it naturally occurs, without interfering with it.

The opposite type of reaction under the influence of ignorance is fear and agitation: “This is too much, I am not able to handle this!” Whenever that happens, we immediately give emphasis to letting go and relaxing. By calming the mind and reassuring ourselves that we are able to face the truth of our own mortality, the tendency to become agitated can be gradually overcome.

FACING MORTALITY

The *Dhātuvibhaṅga-sutta* refers to the type of feeling experienced by an accomplished practitioner close to death as a category of its own, encouraging its contemplation in the same way as the three types of feeling taken up under the second *satipaṭṭhāna* (to be discussed in the next chapter). The pattern is invariably that, when feeling a certain type of feeling, one knows: “I feel this type of feeling.” Here this pattern is applied to feeling qualified as “ending with life” (*jīvitapariyantika*; MN 140).

Those who have been really close to death know the distinct affective tone of being on the brink of passing away, the intensity and resultant total presence of the mind, which at times comes with a different sense of time, as if everything were in slow motion. With sustained practice of recollection of death in the way described above, this intensity and total presence can at times come to accompany our meditative facing of our own mortality. A distinct difference, however, is that painful feelings of distress and dread are being replaced by

neutral feelings of mental equipoise.

Becoming in this way accomplished in facing death makes a substantial contribution not only to the actual moment of dying, but also to daily life. Having learned to face death with equipoise nourishes an inner peace that remains unshaken by the vicissitudes of life. All it takes to gain this vantage point of inner imperturbability is a sustained effort in the meditative practice of facing our own mortality.

At some uncertain point in the future we will have to face death anyway. This is certain. Who knows what the conditions will be at that time? We might be sick and in pain, surrounded by others who are crying and upset, with unfinished things looming in the air and worries burdening our mind. If we do not prepare ourselves, it will be very difficult to face death in such a situation.

The time to prepare for death is right here and now. When else could it be? Just as we would not start to study only on the day of examination, just as we would not start to train only on the day of competition, similarly it is not a good idea to wait for the time of dying in order to prepare for death. Such preparations are better done in advance, when we are reasonably healthy and able to approach the fact of our mortality gradually. Learning to face our mortality step by step, we are training in the art of dying. Training in the art of dying is at the same time training in the art of living.

Recollection of death is not only a preparation for dying, but also a way of coming fully alive. Being aware of our own mortality and that of others makes it unmistakably clear that the present moment is the only time when we can live. By facing our own shadow of death, instead of running away from it, we gradually become whole. This is actually a process of healing, by allowing death to become an integral part of our life. Death is inseparable from life; ignoring its existence, we can never live fully.

Awareness of our mortality also encourages us to be completely with those we meet. Who knows: I might die or the person I meet might die. Therefore, let me make best use of the present moment by giving my full attention to whoever I meet. Let me be with them to the utmost of my ability such that, if death should separate us, there will be no regrets. There will be nothing left unsaid that I would rather

have communicated, nothing left unsolved that I would rather have clarified, and, most important of all, nothing left to forgive that I would rather have forgiven or apologized for.

Recollection of death clarifies our priorities in life. In the face of our mortality, how should we live our lives in such a way that we can die without regrets? As a supportive exercise for such reflection, I recommend taking death out for a solitary walk. During such a walk, we might reflect on what would happen if we were not to come back from this walk. What would happen to our possessions, friends, and relatives, our role and function in society?

Reflecting in this way, we increasingly learn to let go of clinging to possessions, with the understanding that anyway we cannot keep them forever. We readily forgive those who have wronged us and become willing to apologize quickly whenever we have hurt others. We learn to let go of the tendency to try to manipulate or force others to be or act the way we want.

If I were to die now, they would do things their own way in any case. So let me give them my support and guidance in an open manner, without trying to force them to do things my way and without creating dependencies. Reflecting in this way lessens our attachment to our role, job, and function within our social network. We do our best, without depending too much on the results and with the clear understanding that sooner or later others will continue without us. Our priorities become clarified. What is it that I really want to do before I move on? What really matters to me?

The transformative power of recollection of death makes it indeed worthwhile to dedicate time to its practice and cultivation, be this in formal sitting, during daily activities, or by way of reflection. Recollection of our mortality can be supported by repeated reminders during everyday life. Seeing road kill or passing by a cemetery can serve as such direct reminders of death. In addition, we are surrounded by so many things that have been designed and manufactured by others who in the meantime have passed away. Once we are willing to attend to death, a broad range of possible reminders offer themselves. Every single act of such recollection is another step to counter ignorance, the ingrained tendency to ignore our own death. Every such step makes its contribution to bringing us gradually closer

to the realization of the deathless.

In addition, giving attention only to the skeleton can be continued during various activities. Shifting from sitting to walking meditation, we just remain aware of the skeleton. Walking as a skeleton, standing as a skeleton, eating as a skeleton, lying down to rest as a skeleton; there is no limit to the activities that can be carried out with awareness of our own skeleton. Practising in this way keeps alive the fact of our mortality.

Awareness of the skeleton can in fact be used as a convenient summary of all three body contemplations. With the skeleton all sexually attractive parts are gone and we would not have any sensual desire for it. Similarly, all markers of identity are gone. It is hardly possible for us to recognize the identity of a particular skeleton, leaving little room for considering it to be “me” or “mine”. Combined with using the skeleton as a reminder of mortality, this single mode of attention can activate central themes of all three body contemplations.

THE ELEMENTS AND DEATH

Yet another mode of practice relates recollection of death to the elements. This can be undertaken by visualizing the stages of dying. At first, when death comes close, the body feels heavy and control over the limbs of the body is gradually lost. The dying might try to remove their blanket (if they are still able to do so) to alleviate the general feeling of being oppressed by some weight. This is the stage when the earth element begins to disintegrate. Those who care for the dying might notice their increasing inability to move. Moreover, on trying to lift up the dying they might find them to be subjectively heavier. This is because with the disintegration of the earth element the structure of the body loses its solidity. Therefore it becomes more difficult to lift up and move around a person who has reached this stage of dying.

With the next stage the dying person loses control over the bodily liquids. This is the beginning of the disintegration of the water element. The mouth dries up and the person becomes thirsty. Outside observers can notice water coming out of the eyes and drops of urine out of the urethra. At times the dying might open their mouth and stretch out their tongue as if wanting to drink.

With the next stage the fire element begins to dissolve. The body

starts to lose its temperature. A sense of coldness moves from the tips of the toes and the fingers gradually towards the heart. Those who are by the side of the dying person might notice that feet and hands turn bluish and at times the person starts to shiver. Whereas at the time of the dissolution of the earth element the dying might try to remove their blanket, at this stage they prefer to be covered in order to prevent the loss of heat.

The final stage comes with the dissolution of the wind element. The dying person experiences great difficulty in taking in the required amount of oxygen. The inhalations are visibly shorter and strained, the exhalations longer and weaker. The whole process of breathing becomes more and more laboured until with a last exhalation it ceases completely.

Visualizing ourselves going through these stages of dying can become a powerful way of cultivating recollection of death. At the same time, it offers a useful preparation for the time of dying. Of course, we might die suddenly in an accident. But chances are that the events leading up to our death will involve these stages. Familiarizing ourselves with them through meditative practice and recollection helps to recognize what is happening and face it with a balanced mind. It also helps to recognize what others might be going through at the time of dying and enables us to know how they can best be assisted.

OPEN PRACTICE

Contemplation of the anatomical parts has imbued our practice with a sense of non-attachment, and contemplation of the elements has instilled in our practice a taste of freedom from identification. Building on these, contemplation of death establishes a powerful perception of impermanence through recognition of our own mortality. Based on the foundation laid by these three body contemplations, we move on to an unstructured mode of practice by opening up the vista of our awareness to anything that happens in the present moment. Proceeding in this way, we are gradually coming closer to the experience of the deathless.

Whereas contemplation of the anatomical parts and elements has rooted mindfulness in the body, contemplation of death firmly establishes us in the present moment, the only time when we can truly

live. This is the contribution made by contemplation of death to the hub of the wheel of practice: coming fully alive to the present moment. The contribution made to the rim of the wheel is a substantial diminishing of clinging and attachment through the realization that we would have to let go anyway when we die. We learn to face the terror of our own mortality, the cutting edge of impermanence. This substantially nourishes our ability to dwell independently without clinging to anything.

SUMMARY

Contemplation of a corpse in decay can be employed to reveal the body's lack of inherent beauty or else its mortality. By way of implementing the second alternative, we can combine the mental image of a skeleton (or of another stage of decay) with awareness of respiration, keeping in mind the uncertainty of being able to take even the next breath.

Such contemplation is best undertaken with a keen eye on balance. Here giving attention either to the inhalations or to the exhalations can be employed to maintain balance. Attention to inhalations can be yoked to recollection of our mortality in order to strengthen the practice, while attention to exhalations can come with an attitude of relaxing and letting go in order to calm the mind if it becomes too agitated.

Undertaken in a balanced but sustained manner, such practice helps to drive home the undeniable fact that death is certain, and that it could in principle happen even right now. Learning in this way to allow death to become part of our life, our priorities become clarified and we learn to live more fully in the present.