



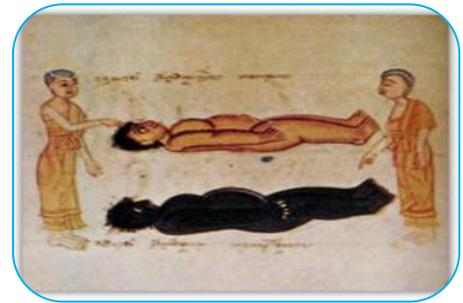
## THE CONCEPT OF MARAṆASSATI (MINDFULNESS OF DEATH)

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### ABSTRACT:

Death in the Buddhist tradition is a natural phenomenon. It appears with the life and continues to exist; so long there is the process of life. It is an unavoidable fact. To understand the significance of *Maraṇassati*, a clear definition of the term *Maraṇassati* in the *Tipiṭaka* is essential. According to the Buddhist way of thought, everyone has to confront death without any exemption, but if human beings know and understand the true meaning of death, death shall no more be threatening. In the Buddhist view, therefore, the malady of existence has been diagnosed and a remedy has been found, the “door to the deathless” stands open. But the Buddha was the “giver of the deathless” only in the sense that he established or made known a possibility that most people would not have seen without his guidance. His conquest of death and ignorance does not suffice for others. Death must be conquered, wisdom developed, and deathlessness attained in the life of each individual. For this reason, Theravada has emphasized systematic methods for people to confront and comprehend death: the meditations on death.



**KEYWORDS:** *Maraṇassati* (Mindfulness of Death), The Practice of Mindfulness of Death, Preparing and Reminding Ourselves about Our Death.

### INTRODUCTION:

The concept of *Maraṇassati* and its meanings and practices which are mentioned in *Tipiṭaka*, the Commentaries, the Sub-Commentaries, the special texts and all other related data, to analyze the roles and benefits of *Maraṇassati*, and to study how to apply *Maraṇassati* to the present societies. From the study, it was found that contemplation of death means to remind oneself that, for both human beings and animals, death can occur at any time. One should accept and consider that death is inevitable so that one’s mind should not suffer through worry and fear of death.

Death has a paradoxical status in *Theravāda* Buddhism for it stands both at the heart of the human predicament and at the heart of the solution to that predicament. In Buddhist thought death constitutes an essential part of the human predicament; it is one of the central factors contributing to the imperfection of existence (*dukkha*); it is a pivotal reality in the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*saṃsāra*) that imprisons human beings. Despite this negative valuation of death, however, death also serves a positive role, for Buddhism has maintained that one does not find liberation from the human predicament by shrinking from death and avoiding all thought of death, but, rather, one finds liberation by confronting death and encountering it as an existential reality. For this reason and to this end Theravada Buddhism has placed emphasis on techniques of meditating on death.

It is found that *Maraṇassati*, when properly applied to the present societies in the right way by giving a new viewpoint about the death, will lead to accepting the reality of death and showing us how to overcome our fears and be prepared for it when it happens. Because mindfulness of death can even be an opportunity to gain insight into the true nature of ourselves and all things, this insight will enable us to become free from all suffering. Practicing the contemplation of death is suitable for all kinds of people, genders and languages without being limited to places and time. It can be practiced all the time and good results will always follow for the practitioner. Practicing the contemplation of death is very useful to life. It helps all humans accept death peacefully and to be conscious of this. Besides, it can be used as a tool to stimulate one's mind not to be careless in doing good deeds. Morality will be the focus in one's mind and it results in indescribable good deeds.

The development of *Maraṇassati* is the way which helps us to treasure our time more without making us more attached to the present thing, because our life is not sure. We should spend our time wisely. On the other hand, we should not get too attached to our bodies, as we understand clearly that they are subject to old age, illness and death. This also helps us to let go of other things as all formations are transient, and it leads us to live with heedfulness. The practice of the contemplation of death will help humans at the end of their lives be reborn with all good deeds while terminating all bad deeds because one maintains oneself in goodness. By being conscious of reminding oneself about death, it can be said that one is suitably prepared for death, being well-versed in the teachings of Buddhism. This practice leads to the cultivation of wisdom and to the attainment of Enlightenment.

### The Meaning of Maraṇassati (Mindfulness of Death)

Etymologically, the term "*Maraṇassati*"<sup>1</sup> is a compound formed from two terms, *Maraṇa* and *Sati* or *Anussati*. Generally, the term "*Maraṇassati*" itself consists of two words. One word is "*Maraṇa*" or "Death." The other word is "*Sati*" or "*Anussati*" which means "Mindfulness, Reflection and Consideration." The two words combined together become *Maraṇassati* and *Maraṇānussati*, which are translated into "Mindfulness of Death." However, in the terminology of the Buddhist Dictionary, the most comprehensive meaning of *Maraṇassati* and *Maraṇānussati* would be, "the practice of mindfulness meditation by using death as the object of meditation".<sup>2</sup>

### Mindfulness of Death (Maranassati)

The detailed instructions for the practice of mindfulness of death, *maraṇassati*, describe this meditation as essentially very simple. The meditator is instructed to withdraw to a solitary place, there to focus his mind on the thought "Death will occur, the life faculty will be interrupted"<sup>3</sup>. Or he may meditate solely on the idea "Death, death." Despite the outward simplicity of this practice, however, the *Visuddhimagga* indicates that successfully developing mindfulness of death is very difficult. Human beings, although well aware of death, somehow avoid acknowledging death as a reality in their own lives. Buddhism has regarded this unexamined assumption of our own immortality and indestructibility as a major part of the ignorance (*avijjā*) that prevents our striving for enlightenment. In an interesting analogy, the Buddha is said to have compared this amazing human attitude toward death with that of a man who goes along not realizing his turban is ablaze.<sup>4</sup>

To enable the meditator to surmount this difficulty of coming to terms with the reality of death in his own life, the *Visuddhimagga* sets out eight specific ways of meditating on death. These eight ways represent eight reflections on various aspects of death which collectively constitute a powerful method guiding the meditator through progressive stages of confronting and comprehending the reality of

<sup>1</sup> Rhys Davids, T.W and William Stede, op. cit., p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Phramaha Wuddhijaya Vajjiramedhi, Disasters Within: Buddhist Guide on How to Gain Wisdom from Life's Inevitable Crisis, tr., Nashara Siamwalla, (Bangkok: Amarin Publishing, 2006), p.39.

<sup>3</sup> Vism. p. 230.

<sup>4</sup> S.I. p. 108.

death. The aspects of death to be reflected on are<sup>5</sup>: (1) death as having the appearance of an executioner; (2) death as the ruin of all success; (3) death as the inevitable end for all persons-just as it strikes down the great and mighty, so will it strike us down also; (4) death as the result of “sharing the body with many”; a reflection on the infinite number of factors, both internal and external, that can cause death; (5) death as lying near a t hand, kept away only by this frail process of life; (6) death as “signless”; nothing about it can be predicted or known in advance; (7) death as the certain end of a life span that is short at best; and (8) death as a constant phenomenon, occurring at every moment for the aggregates of existence. Let us look briefly at these eight stages of reflection and the way that they facilitate the meditator's confrontation with death.

The first reflection exposes the meditator to the general truth that death is an integral and inevitable part of life. “It comes with birth and takes away life” just as surely as the executioner takes life.<sup>6</sup> Death is not alien to life but a concomitant of life. The *Visuddhimagga* says that just as “budding toadstools (or, literally in the *Pāṇi* metaphor, “snakes’ umbrellas,” *ahicchatta*) come up carrying dirt on their heads, so human beings are born carrying aging and death”<sup>7</sup>. It is inevitable; just as the sun having risen moves towards setting, never turning back for a moment, or just as a mountain stream rushes downhill without stopping, so beings rush toward death without any possibility of a respite.<sup>8</sup> Through reflection on these and similar images, the meditator begins to develop awareness of the practical implications of the Buddha's teaching “Whatever is born, brought into being and conditioned must necessarily decay and dissolve”.<sup>9</sup> Death represents one of the four inevitable things.<sup>10</sup>

The second reflection leads the meditator to another stage in the understanding of death by focusing his awareness on the tragic nature of death. Not only is death inevitable, but it is the inevitable destroyer of all human happiness, fortune, and hope; it represents the failure or ruin (*vipatti*) of all success (*sampatti*)<sup>11</sup>. No matter how much success a person has in this life, death waits to bring final defeat; even the great Asoka, who conquered “all the earth,” was defeated in the end by death and sorrow<sup>12</sup>. The meditator is instructed to see death as the tragic end of life and as part of the complex of dukkha. Death and the related factors of dukkha haunt life, preventing people from controlling their own existence and from attaining lasting happiness and success in this world<sup>13</sup>.

The third reflection marks an important transition in the meditator's reflection on and confrontation with death. Whereas the preceding reflections have disclosed the universality of death, this reflection now compels the meditator to apply this universality to himself. The meditator shifts his focus from the theoretical implications of death to the personal implications by meditating on seven types of great beings. Reflecting on these beings, the meditator recalls that despite their greatness, they did not avert death. And then the meditator asks, “If this death inevitably befell those of great fame and great following, those endowed with great wealth such as Mahāsammata, . . . then how shall it not befall me?”<sup>14</sup>. This reflection recalls the teaching of the *Salla sutta*: “The young and old, the fool and the sage all come under the power of death, all end in death”<sup>15</sup>.

Reflections four, five, and six lead the meditator one stage further in facing death as an existential reality. To the realization attained in the previous stage, “death is a certainty for me,” these

<sup>5</sup> Vism. p. 230-238.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.230.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 231.

<sup>9</sup> D. II. p.144.

<sup>10</sup> A.2. p. 171.

<sup>11</sup> Vism. p. 232.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 232.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.p. 232.

<sup>14</sup> Vism. p. 232-35; cf. S. I. p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> Sn. p. 578.

reflections add the recognition of the imminence of death. The meditator reflects on the many diseases and parasites “sharing the body” that can cause death at any time<sup>16</sup>. He concentrates on the countless external creatures, such as scorpions, snakes, etc., or the various kinds of accidents capable of bringing death. This fourth reflection represents one of the ways that the Buddha is said to have taught mindfulness of death<sup>17</sup>. The fifth reflection requires the meditator to concentrate on the delicately balanced conditions supporting life<sup>18</sup>. Life depends on ephemeral breath, on the proper balance of cold and heat, of the postures, and of the four elements, as well as on proper nutrition. If any of these factors are upset, out of proportion, or absent, life ceases. Compounding this awareness of human vulnerability to death, the meditator is next instructed to reflect that death, although constantly imminent, awaits in secret and cannot be known in advance<sup>19</sup>. Neither the time of death, the cause of death, nor the destiny after death can be known in advance. Taken together, these three reflections (four, five, and six) create an awareness of the frailty and insecurity of life. They counteracted Māra’s advice to rest assured for “there is no present approach of death.”

The final stage of awareness of death is reached in the last two reflections which underscore the reality of death by indicating that life, even when it reaches its maximum, is brief. The seventh reflection reminds the meditator that the life span of people in this age is very short in contrast to previous ages. “One who lives long lives only a hundred years, more or less”<sup>20</sup>. The brevity of life is a frequent theme in the *Pāṭi* Canon, and this reflection draws on canonical teachings to stress this theme<sup>21</sup>. Buddhaghosa refers to a sutta of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* wherein an ancient master named Araka explained the brevity of life with similes<sup>22</sup>. Buddhaghosa commends these similes to one who would meditate on death. The meditator should reflect, for instance, that: “Just as a dew drop on the tip of a blade of grass quickly vanishes and does not remain long when the sun rises, even so, like a dew drop is the life of a human being, limited, insignificant, and filled with suffering and trouble.” Or, “Just as a line drawn on water with a stick quickly disappears and does not last long, even so, like a stick’s line is the life of a human being . . .”<sup>23</sup>. The last reflection (eight) compounds this awareness that life is indeed short by reminding the meditator that in the ultimate sense death occurs at every moment<sup>24</sup>. Neither the past nor the future have any real existence. Life exists only in the fleeting present moment that is constantly dying.

To summarize these eight reflections of mindfulness of death, *marañassati*, we must recognize the total effect they have on the meditator. They bring about a confrontation with death. Even the sequence of these reflections seems to have been devised to produce the greatest psychological impact on the meditator. Undoubtedly, a meditator who diligently practiced mindfulness of death would experience a vivid confrontation or anticipation of death. Through this confrontation, the reflections overcome the meditator’s denial of the reality of death and compel him to accept his own mortality. They manifest clearly the predicament of human beings trapped in *saṃsāra* and *dukkha*. Going around in cycles of birth and death, human beings are like oxen yoked to a machine<sup>25</sup>.

But if this confrontation with death makes clear the human predicament and the urgency of the human situation, it also makes clear the way out of the predicament, for mindfulness of death leads to seeing the true nature of reality. Meditating on death in terms of these reflections, the meditator begins to comprehend the “three marks” of existence: impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and no-self

<sup>16</sup> Vism. p. 235.

<sup>17</sup> A. III. p. 306.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 235-36.

<sup>19</sup> Reflection six, Vism. p. 236.

<sup>20</sup> Vism. p. 237.

<sup>21</sup> Sn. p. 804.

<sup>22</sup> A. IV. p. 136-39.

<sup>23</sup> A. IV. p. 137.

<sup>24</sup> Vism. p. 238.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 237.

(*anatta*). Life is impermanent; its conditions change rapidly, producing death. Seeing the reality of death one must conclude that human existence is insecure, insignificant, and filled with suffering. That we are trapped in these processes over which we have no control is an indication of the fundamental voidness of existence, or *anatta*. We can say, therefore, that this confrontation with death, through the mindfulness of death, *marañassati*, is salvific in the twofold sense delineated by Swearer: Mindfulness of death engenders both control and freedom.<sup>26</sup> It brings about control in the sense of disciplining the desire for existence and creating a sense of detachment from the world, and it facilitates freedom by moving the meditator toward liberating wisdom. What Swearer says about sati in general holds true for *marañassati*, as we shall see below: "It lays the groundwork for later developments in the meditative life."<sup>27</sup>

### PREPARING AND REMINDING OURSELVES ABOUT OUR DEATH

Most people are careless about how to deal with and face death. They are also afraid of talking about death as well. In fact, death is what all human beings are not to be afraid of, because we accept it and it will help us to be free from the suffering and to face it positively. So, it is good to make a preparation for death. If we practice mindfulness of death, we will then be more aware of death and develop a sense of urgency in life that prompts us to do good while we can with the time we have before the end comes. We should recall the words, "*marañam, marañam* or death, death". It will give sufficient evidence of death all around us, since everything is changing from moment to moment.

We surely are going to die someday, because death is certain; there is no time for wasting, so we need to be ever mindful of death. Thus, we have to prepare ourselves before death comes. We do not wait until the storm pounds the shore before we start to prepare. Similarly, knowing that death is looming off shore, we should not wait until it overpowers us before developing the meditation skills necessary to achieve the great potentiality of the mind at the moment of death. Because human life is short, we need to do good things for our next life and also to for benefit at the time of death. Just as Lord Buddha said:

"Bhikkhu, this human life span is short. There is a new life to go to, there are profitable (deeds) to be done, and there is the life of purity to be led. There is not dying for the born. He who lives long lives a hundred years, more or less. The life of human kind is short; a wise man holds it in contempt and acts as one whose head is burning; Death will never fail to come."<sup>28</sup>

As mentioned above, this means that we should live and act purely and try to develop mindfulness of death now, because the human life span is too short. When we devote and well develop mindfulness of death, we are constantly diligent. We acquire perception of disenchantment with all kinds of becoming or existence. We conquer attachment to life or self. We are able to avoid much storing. We have no stain of avarice about material pleasure. Perception of impermanence grows in our minds, following upon which there appears the perception of pain and not-self.<sup>29</sup> If we do not develop mindfulness of death, we fall victim to fear, horror and confusion at the time of death as though suddenly seized by wild beasts, spirits, snakes, robbers, or murderers.<sup>30</sup>

We are born as human beings, so we are intelligent enough to recognize the problems and sufferings of cyclic existence unlike lower types of beings such as animals, and we are not so overwhelmed by either suffering or happiness that causes us to be blinded to the realities of cyclic existence. We have to realize what is important for our lives in order to live and die happily and peacefully. Through understanding the impermanence of life, we should become keenly aware of death and resolve to the present life. Because only practising meditation can help us to be freed from

<sup>26</sup> Swearer, "Control and Freedom: The Structure of Buddhist Meditation in the Pāli Suttas," p. 435-55.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 441.

<sup>28</sup> Ñānamoli, Bhikkhu, The Path of Purification, op. cit., p 255.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 259.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

suffering, we will die undeluded and fearlessly without falling into any such a state.<sup>31</sup> If we do not attain deathlessness here and now, we are at least headed for a happy destiny on the breakup of the body.

## CONCLUSION

According to the Buddhist way of thinking, death, far from being a subject to be shunned and avoided, is the key that unlocks the seeming mystery of life. It is by understanding death that we understand life; for death is part of the process of life in the larger sense. In another sense, life and death are two ends of the same process and if you understand one end of the process, you also understand the other end. Hence, by understanding the purpose of death, we also understand the purpose of life. It is the contemplation of death, the intensive thought that it will someday come upon us, that softens the hardest of hearts, binds one to another with cords of love and compassion, and destroys the barriers of caste, creed and race among the peoples of this earth all of whom are subject to the common destiny of death. Death is a great leveler. Pride of birth, pride of position, pride of wealth, pride of power must give way to the all-consuming thought of inevitable death.

Thus, it will be seen that mindfulness of death not only purifies and refines the mind but also has the effect of robbing death of its fears and terrors, and helps one at that solemn moment when he is gasping for his last breath, to face that situation with fortitude and calm. He is never unnerved at the thought of death but is always prepared for it. One more thing, when we develop mindfulness of death and prepare for it well, it will enable us to overcome fear, attachment and other emotions that could arise at the time of death and cause our minds to be disturbed, unpeaceful, and even negative. Preparing for death will enable us to die peacefully with a clear, positive state of mind. The benefits of being aware of death can be corroborated by the results of the near-death experience.

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<sup>31</sup> Ñāṇamoli, Bhikkhu, The Path of Purification, *ibid*.