

The speaker for 3/17/2010 was Mary Ellen Meyers, a volunteer at Zen Hospice.

Mary Ellen has been a long time practitioner of Aikido, one of the most mindful martial arts (<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=993600778636390365#>). After about ten years of practice, she had become very good at the technical side, but realized that something was missing. In a conversation with her sensei (teacher), she was directed to learn compassion. How does someone learn compassion?

She applied to be a volunteer at the SF Zen Hospice, but was turned down and told to re-apply in a year. After a year, she again applied, and was turned down again. Another year passed, and she applied again, and was accepted this time.

As a volunteer at the Zen Hospice Project (<http://www.zenhospice.org/>), she been learning about compassion by sitting with people who are dying. She continues her study of Aikido.

We opened with a poem by Dawna Markova.

I will not die an unlived life
I will not live in fear
of falling or catching fire.
I choose to inhabit my days,
to allow my living to open me
to make me less afraid,
more accessible
to loosen my heart
until it becomes a wing,
a torch, a promise.
I choose to risk my significance,
to live
so that which came to me as seed
goes to the next as blossom
and that which came to me as blossom,
goes on a fruit.

- Dawna Markova

Mary Ellen led us through a practice called The Nine Contemplations of Atisha.

The Nine Contemplations of Atisha

By Joan Halifax Roshi

The Nine Contemplations that follow offer a way to explore the inevitability of death and what is important to us in the light of our mortality. The practice asks us to question what we are doing in our life at this very moment and to see what is important for us to do in order to prepare for death. The contemplations come from Atisha, an eleventh-century Tibetan Buddhist scholar, who systematized the method for generating an enlightened mind. This practice is based on the work of Larry Rosenberg.

Meditation: The Nine Contemplations

The Practice

Find a comfortable place to sit. Make sure that your body is relaxed and calm. If you want to, close your eyes. Let your mind settle. Bring your attention to your breath. There are nine contemplations that remind us about the nature of life and death. Please consider them deeply.

1. All of Us Will Die Sooner or Later

Even though it may be difficult for you to realize that someday you will die, there is no question that you will be met by death sooner or later. There is no way around it. No one can prevent death; death is the outcome of birth. It is inevitable.

Not a single sentient being- no matter how spiritually evolved, powerful, wealthy, or motivated-has escaped death. The Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad did not escape death, nor will you and I. All the gifts of your life-education, wealth, status, strength, fame, gender, friends, and family-will make no difference at the moment of death. In fact, many of these circumstances can make dying harder because we hang on to them. Death lends a sense of profound equality to us all.

Look at your life. What are you doing right now that will help you die? Please consider this, and observe your response to this question. Then remind yourself, "Death is inevitable. I, too, will die." Repeat this statement to yourself. On the in-breath, "Death is inevitable." On the out-breath, "I, too, will die." When the mind wanders away from this contemplation of the inevitability of death, call it back. Do not lose the opportunity to realize that you cannot avoid your death. You might resist by drifting in thought or turning to fantasy. Bring your attention back to this contemplation - that you will die, that each being precious to you will die, that each person and each creature now on earth will die.

Watch what the mind may do to escape this very simple fact. Death is inevitable. Can you face this truth? Can you feel it in your body, your blood, your bones; can you know it in your breath? The inevitability of death pervades every cell in your body. Please do not forget this. Death is inevitable; this is the first contemplation.

2. Your Life Span is Decreasing Continuously

Your life span lessens every moment that you live. There is the moment of your birth, and then the time of your death. Life flows for better or worse between these two points of change. Your movement toward death never stops. Every breath you take in and give out brings you closer to this destination that we call death. Every word that you speak, every thought that you have brings you nearer to death. Every step that you take brings you closer to your so-called final resting place.

As you consider that your life span and that of all living beings is ever decreasing, notice what comes up in your mind. If the mind attempts to divert you, call yourself back to this truth that your life is limited. Recognize this. See it clearly. Perhaps appreciate what you have now, and that there may be no tomorrow.

In light of your life's ever decreasing span, what are you doing with this precious life now to live life fully and to support a sane and gentle death? Do you appreciate this life? What are you doing to help others? What will give your life meaning and the lives of others meaning in the light of life's briefness?

Please ask yourself these questions as you remember that your life grows shorter each second. This is the second contemplation.

3. Death Will Come Whether You Are Prepared or Not

Life is short, and most of us will meet our death without having strengthened our awareness of our true nature. How much time do you now spend training, strengthening, and stabilizing your mind? When death comes, do you think that you can negotiate with it for more time?

Someone once said that we have 1,300,000 thoughts every day. How many of these thoughts are you even aware of? How many of these thoughts are about liberation from suffering and death? How often do you remember that, indeed, death will come? How often do you turn your mind toward the commitment to prepare for death? Death is merciless. It has no discrimination. Up until the time it comes, if we are wise, we will be mindful of death.

Please ask yourself: How do you spend your time? What really is important for you to do with this precious human life? We spend so much time eating, drinking, grooming, playing, working, sleeping. We conduct business, make and spend money, and tend our relationships. When we are dying, we might wonder, "What have I done with my life?" Most of us are doing so little to prepare ourselves for death. This contemplation, reminding us that death will come whether we are prepared or not encourages us to take care of life now and prepare for death.

In light of the truth of your ever-decreasing life span, how do you want to spend your time, your energy, your resources? Is there a way that you can truly benefit others and yourself? What kind of practice will strengthen your mind? What can you do to wake up in this life? Is your capacity to give attention to the mind and body in this moment adequate to meet the challenge of dying and death?

You can ready yourself right now. Watch your mind. Does it avoid seeing the fact that death will come regardless of whether you are prepared for it? Before going on this journey, please make the best arrangements possible. Prepare yourself for going to this destination that we call death. Consider the third contemplation that death will come whether will come whether or not we are prepared.

4. Your Life Span, Like That of All Living Beings, is not Fixed.

Think of the many beings who died this day. How many of them really thought they were going to die today? There is an essential uncertainty about the time of your death. Do you really think that you know how much time you have left? Please consider this.

Death can come at any moment. You could die this afternoon; you could die tomorrow morning; you could die on your way to work. You could die in your sleep. Most of us try to avoid the sense that death can come at any time, but the timing of death is unknown to all of us.

Can we live each day as if it were our last? Can we listen to one another, relate to one another, as if there is no tomorrow?

Are you ready to die? Abide in the cycle of your inbreath and outbreath, remembering that death can come at any moment. You do not know how long this life span will be. This is the fourth contemplation.

5. Death Has Many Causes

There are so many ways to die. The causes of death are infinite. You can die because of a storm or an accident; you can die of cancer, heart disease, diabetes, old age, and so forth. You can die of fear or a

broken heart. Even if you have been diagnosed with a so-called terminal illness, it may not be the cause of your death.

Watch what your mind does when you contemplate the truth that death can come through so many doors. Do you try to avoid this thought, or are you able to consider the possibilities? There are many conditions that bring death, and the forces that sustain life are few. All life ends in death, one way or another. Consider this fifth contemplation that death has many causes.

6. Your Body Is Fragile and Vulnerable

When you are young, you may feel as if you will live forever. Growing older, seeing other people die, you may know differently. Life hangs by a breath. Breathe in. After this next exhalation, consider the possibility that you might not be able to inhale. When the wind has gone from your nostrils and the breath no longer enters your body, then your life span has ended, and you will die.

Look deeply at the truth of this. Say to yourself, "This life is so fragile and is completely dependent on my breath. Breathing in, my life depends on this inhalation. Breathing out, my life depends on this exhalation." Can you allow yourself to really know that your life is hanging by a breath? Inhalation, "My life depends on this in-breath." Exhalation, "My life depends on this out-breath."

The beating of your heart, the activity of your brain gives life to your life. A heart attack or a stroke can bring you down in an instant. An accident, a moment of violence, a mistake can bring your life to a surprising and rapid end.

Consider how vulnerable this body is. What does your mind do when you remember this? Does knowing how vulnerable and fragile you are turn your mind toward living? Does it deepen your experience? The sixth contemplation is a reminder to consider this human body. Your life is literally hanging by a breath.

7. Your Loved Ones Cannot Keep You from Death

It is only natural to turn to friends and family at the time of your dying. However, the people whom you love cannot keep death from you, and these strong attachments may produce sorrow and clinging, which make dying more difficult. Your loved ones are essentially helpless and powerless in the face of your dying. No matter how kind and adept your friends might be, ultimately they cannot prevent your death. There is nothing they can do for you at the moment of your death. Death will simply prevail. Look at this deeply.

Since your friends will not be able to stop death from taking you, ask yourself, what really is going to help at the moment of your death? Your loved ones cannot keep you from death.

This is the seventh contemplation.

8. At the Moment of Your Death, Your Material Resources Are Of No Use to You.

Imagine yourself on your deathbed. You are growing weaker and more frail by the moment. You have spent your entire life earning money, accumulating material possessions. You have a beautiful house, a nice car, jewelry, and fine clothes. On the threshold of death, what good are these things to you?

Every single penny, every single item must be left behind. Houses, bank accounts, art objects, fine wines, beautiful clothing, expensive jewelry—all the comforts that you worked so hard for—you have to leave behind. They will be utterly useless to you when you are on the threshold of death. In some sense they are worse than useless. They are impediments to fully surrendering to death. In order to die in peace, you

will have to let go of everything. In considering this, can you see yourself clinging to these things that make up part of your story and identity?

Consider that all your cherished objects, all your money, will be in some way or another redistributed at the time of your death. Everything that you have accumulated over so many years will be given away to friends and relatives. Some of it may end up in a thrift store or a junk pile. You can take nothing with you.

Now ask yourself: What is a sound investment to make in this life? What will be really important at the moment of my death? Material possessions will not help. On the inbreath consider this. On the outbreath know what it is to release the breath and attachment to all that you possess. This is the eighth contemplation; that your material resources will be of no use to you at the moment of your death.

9. Your Own Body Cannot Help You at the Time of Your Death.

You have spent so much time working on your body-feeding it, watering it, exercising it, dressing and undressing it, beautifying it, enjoying and not enjoying it. You may spend hours just thinking about your body, viewing it in a mirror, evaluating its appearance, trying to make it look younger and more beautiful. Then what happens? It dies on you anyway.

Since your conception and birth, this body has been your constant companion, sometimes a friend, sometimes an enemy. You have experienced so much pain in it and so much pleasure. You treasure it. You despise it. And at the moment of death, you lose it.

This is not to say that you should neglect this body. You should take care of it. Although you are not your body, the care you give your body may make a difference in your practice and your relationships.

At this moment can you feel your dependence on your body, your attachment to your body? Can you see how holding on to your body at the time of your dying might torment you? Imagine what it might be like just before you die. You realize suddenly that you are losing your money, your friends, your loved ones, your status, your job. And at the moment of your death, in an instant, you will also lose your body. Consider this. Abiding in the inbreath, abiding in the outbreath, remember that even your body cannot help you at the time of death. Can you understand how others may feel who are facing their deaths? Why there is so much fear, so much clinging to life, such anger in anticipation of giving up life? Can you feel compassion for yourself and for others?

What is really important for you in light of this truth that we cannot hold on to this body when we die? What can you do to prepare yourself to face your death and to skillfully help others face theirs? What can you do to prepare? What can you do to strengthen your awareness and your capacity to surrender to death? What can you do to make it more possible to really be present for yourself or another who is facing the loss of everything at the moment of death? The ninth contemplation reminds us that our body will be of no use to us at the moment of our death.

These are the nine contemplations: Death is inevitable. Our life span is decreasing continuously. Death will come regardless of whether we are prepared for it. Human life expectancy is uncertain. Death has many causes. The human body is fragile and vulnerable. Our friends cannot keep us from death. Our material resources cannot help us at the moment of death. And our own body cannot help us at the time of death. Consider these truths.

Mary Ellen led us in singing "This May be the Last Time" by the Blind Boys of Alabama
(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsxce3YAjcs>)

This may be the last time
This may be the last time, children
This may be the last time
May be the last time I don't know

May be the last time we ever shout together
May be the last time I don't know

This may be the last time
This may be the last time, children
This may be the last time
May be the last time I don't know

May be the last time we ever among together
May be the last time I don't know

This may be the last time
This may be the last time, children
This may be the last time
May be the last time I don't know

May be the last time we fellowship together
May be the last time I don't know

This may be the last time
This may be the last time, children
This may be the last time
May be the last time I don't know

I have always known that finally I would take this road,
But yesterday
I didn't know it would be today.
- Death Poem by Ariwara no Narihira, 9th Century Japan