Impermanence – Embracing Change

Thanks to impermanence, everything is possible.
(Thich Nhat Hanh)
The Beauty of Impermanence
(an internet article)

Impermanence is a favorite topic of mine, one that is constantly at the back of my mind. Whether it is looking at cherry blossoms, reading or watching historical epics, I am always aware of the presence of impermanence. Yet it is not something that is necessarily bad. It is merely a part of this life. When there is a heavy storm, getting upset serves little purpose. All we can do is to adjust our actions to manage the situation. It is the same with impermanence. When we appreciate its value and place in this world, we can learn to manage it more effectively.

Cherry Blossoms: The Beauty of Impermanence

The Japanese are keen observers of nature. In the process, they have learned many important secrets of life. Take the cherry blossom for example. Given its nature, it has come to symbolize many things. By blooming en masse, it reminds us of clouds. But because of its extreme beauty and quick death, it is also an enduring metaphor for impermanence.

The Importance of Impermanence

What is impermanent in this world? Quite simply, the answer is everything. Our life, health, family, friends, status, career, possessions, successes, failures; these are all impermanent. Whether we are ready or not, one day, we will have to part from what we have in one way or another. Even so, impermanence has its value and place in this world.

1. Valuing Each Moment:
Cherry blossoms bloom for only a very short period. It usually reaches its peak within a week after the opening of the first blossoms. After another week, the blooming peak is over and the blossoms fall from the trees. Due to its short lifespan, each moment is precious.
Human beings are odd creatures. When we believe we have eternity we tend to take things for granted. Take our loved ones for example. If we perceive that we have all the time in the world with them, we hardly notice their presence. This is something that advertisements conveniently leave out. Our perception of endless time dulls our senses and awareness. We assume we can tell our loved ones that we love them tomorrow. Time will wait for us. But the moment separation looms on the horizon each second becomes valuable. Impermanence helps us to realize the value of each moment.

2. Living Each Moment Fully:
The Japanese have a lovely custom called hanami. Hanami is an old practice of having a picnic under a blooming cherry blossom tree. Every year, those with a keen interest in this custom will watch the blossom forecast with care. Once they know the dates of the bloom, they will organize an outdoor party under the cherry blossom trees. On the one hand, they can admire the beauty of the flowers and the moment while they are blooming. On the other hand, they can enjoy good company. In this manner, they live each moment of the cherry blossom bloom to the fullest.

What are we to do with impermanence? Giving in to melancholy will only waste precious time. But going to the other extreme with uninhibited revelry serves little purpose as well. It makes more sense to enjoy each moment while making the best of it. If we can live each moment fully, we will have little regret when our time is up.

3. Appreciating the Flavor of Impermanence:
Nature has conditioned cherry blossoms to bloom only once a year. If cherry blossoms were available the whole year round, we would pay less attention to it. But because it only blooms once a year, we do not get bored of its fleeting beauty. It remains fresh in our minds.

By setting a time limit on things, impermanence keeps things fresh. When we have too much of anything, we fail to appreciate its value. But when something is in short supply, its value increases because we cannot get enough of it. Take a live dance performance for example. This event will not last forever, but while it lasts, we can appreciate its magnificence. Thus, impermanence adds a rich flavor to life.

Acceptance

Before we can deal with anything, we have to accept it. This means accepting the change in status quo that impermanence brings. Once change happens, there is no way of going back to how things used to be. All we can do is to learn to adapt to the new situation and this can only happen when we accept it.

Awareness

Next, we must be constantly aware of impermanence. It is easy to forget as we go about the hustle and bustle of our daily lives. Problems can easily distract us and obscure the fact that nothing lasts forever. Then, when we least expect it, impermanence happens and we end up losing someone or something dear to us. If we have not made full use of the time we had, we will end up with a lifetime of regrets.
Nourishment

I am a big believer in proper nourishment for the mind, body and spirit. The right nourishment will lift us up while the wrong one will bring us down. It is no different when it comes to dealing with impermanence. We have to feed our minds on a consistent basis so that we accept impermanence as a part of our lives. With this awareness, we can live each moment as fully as possible while preparing for the inevitable.

Taking Action

Impermanence is inevitable. No matter how hard we try, we cannot avoid it. But this fact does not have to make us sad. Instead, we should go out and live fully. We should try to squeeze as much as we can out of each moment. This way, we will have a lifetime of memories and experiences behind us. When the inevitable happens, we will have less regrets and an easier time letting go. (http://hanofharmony.com/the-beauty-of-impermanence/)
From The Wheel of Life and Death
Philip Kapleau

Why Meditations on Death?

Meditations on death are a means of purifying the mind in order to gain a crucial revelation of the meaning and significance of life and death…Because of death’s general unfathomableness and the dread and terror it inspires in most people, the conquest of death, or deathlessness, has a central place in the teachings of all spiritual traditions. Unless this fear and terror is replaced by comfort and hope, a tranquil mind state is impossible. The unwillingness to think of death is itself a kind of death, for the poignancy of life is inseparable from the knowledge of its inevitable decay.

The Transitory Nature of Life

In all earnestness tell yourself, “The most important task facing me as a human being is to transcend the ceaseless cycle of births, deaths, and rebirths, to awaken to the true meaning of my life and death.” To arouse this determination, one must be deeply aware of the evanescent nature of life: that we are born in the morning and die in the evening; that the friend we saw yesterday is no longer with us today. Most of us see impermanence in the life of another but do not relate it to our own body.

Seriously tell yourself, “Even though I live to be seventy or eighty, death will surely catch up with me.” But even this is putting it too mildly. Think of what might happen to you today or tomorrow. You might be killed in a car crash, or have a stroke or a heart attack. You might discover that you have a life-threatening disease.

Get used to dying before death arrives,
for the dead can only live and the living can only die.
One can savor sights and sounds more deeply when one gets really old. It may be the last time you see a sunset, a tree, the snow, or know winter. The sea, a lake, all become as in childhood, magical and a great wonder: then seen for the first time, now perhaps for the last. Music, bird songs, the wind, the waves: One listens to tones with deeper delight and appreciation. (Helen Newaring)

Death is a favor to us, but our scales have lost their balance. The impermanence of the body should give us great clarity, deepening the wonder in our senses and eyes of this mysterious existence we share and are surely just traveling through. (Hafiz)

By contemplating the impermanence of everything in the world, we are forced to recognize that every time we do something could be the last time we do it, and this recognition can invest the things we do with a significance and intensity that would otherwise be absent. We will no longer sleepwalk through our life. (William Irvine)

Though it seems a harmless gauge of time, a day, to those who fathom its form, is a saw steadily cutting the tree of life. (Tirukkural)

When we finally know we are dying, and all other sentient beings are dying with us, we start to have a burning, almost heartbreaking sense of the fragility and preciousness of each moment and each being, and from this can grow a deep, clear, limitless compassion for all beings. (Sogyal Rinpoche)

All changes are taking place in the universe as willed by the divine. Changes are due to the very fact that this manifestation is not permanent. It is ever-changing. But the Spirit underlying the universe is eternal and changless. (Papa Ramdas)
Buddha

Life is as fleeting as a rainbow, a flash of lightning, a star at dawn. Knowing this, how can you quarrel?

Everything together falls apart. Everything rising up collapses. Every meeting ends in parting. Every life ends in death.

All things conditioned are unstable, impermanent, fragile in essence as an unbaked pot, like something borrowed, or a city founded on sand, they last a short while only. They are inevitably destroyed, like plaster washed off in the rains, like the sandy bank of a river – they are conditioned, and their true nature is frail. They are like the flame of a lamp, which rises suddenly and as soon goes out. They have no power of endurance, like the wind or like foam, unsubstantial, essentially feeble.

A mock show, dew drops, or a bubble, a dream, lightning flash, or cloud, so should one view what is conditioned.

This existence of ours is as transient as autumn clouds. To watch the birth and death of beings is like looking at the movements of a dance. A lifetime is like a flash of lightning in the sky, rushing by, like a torrent down a steep mountain.

When a man considers this world as a bubble of froth, and as the illusion of an appearance, then the king of death has no power over him.
Reflect on this: The realization of impermanence is paradoxically the only thing we can hold onto, perhaps our only lasting possession. It is like the sky, or the earth. No matter how much everything around us may change or collapse, they endure. Say we go through a shattering emotional crisis – our whole life seems to be disintegrating – our husband or wife suddenly leaves us without warning. The earth is still there; the sky is still there. Of course, even the earth trembles now and again, just to remind us we cannot take anything for granted.

Even Buddha died. His death was a teaching, to shock the naïve, the indolent, and complacent, to wake us up to the truth that everything is impermanent and death an inescapable fact of life. As he was approaching death, the Buddha said:

*Of all footprints that of the elephant is supreme;*  
*Of all mindfulness meditations that on death is supreme.*

Whenever we lose our perspective, or fall prey to laziness, reflecting on death and impermanence shakes us back into the truth:

*What is born will die, What has been gathered will be dispersed,*  
*What has been accumulated will be exhausted, What has been built up will collapse,*  
*And what has been high will be brought low.*

The whole universe, scientists now tell us, is nothing but change, activity, and process – a totality of flux that is the ground of all things:

*Every subatomic interaction consists of the annihilation of the original particles and the creation of new subatomic particles. The subatomic world is a continual dance of creation and annihilation, of mass changing into energy and energy changing to mass. Transient forms sparkle in and out of existence, creating a never-ending, forever newly created reality.*

What is our life but this dance of transient forms? Isn’t everything always changing: the leaves on the trees in the park, the light in your room as you read this, the seasons, the weather, the time of day, the people passing you in the street? And what about us? Doesn’t everything we have done in the past seem like a dream now? The friends we grew up with, the childhood haunts, those views and opinions we once held with such single-minded passion: We have left them all behind. Now, at this moment, reading this book seems vividly real to you. Even this page will soon be only a memory.

The cells of our body are dying, the neurons in our brain are decaying, even the expression on our face is always changing, depending on our mood. What we call our basic character is only a “mind-stream,” nothing more. Today we feel good because things are going well; tomorrow we feel the opposite. Where did that good feeling go? New influences took us over as circumstances changed: We are impermanent, the influences are impermanent, and there is nothing solid or lasting anywhere that we can point to.
What could be more unpredictable than our thoughts and emotions: do you have any idea what you are going to think or feel next? Our mind, in fact, is as empty, as impermanent, and as transient as a dream. Look at a thought: It comes, it stays, and it goes. The past is past, the future not yet risen, and even the present thought, as we experience it, becomes the past.

The only thing we really have is nowness, is now.

Sometimes when I teach these things, a person will come up to me afterward and say: “All this seems obvious! I’ve always known it. Tell me something new.” I say to him or her “Have you actually understood, and realized, the truth of impermanence? Have you so integrated it with your every thought, breath, and movement that your life has been transformed? Ask yourself these two questions: Do I remember at every moment that I am dying, and everyone and everything else is, and so treat all beings at all times with compassion? Has my understanding of death and impermanence become so keen and so urgent that I am devoting every second to the pursuit of enlightenment? If you can answer ‘yes’ to both of these, then you have really understood impermanence.”

Life is but a fleeting reflection on the mirror of existence. Permanence exists not, and if your heart speaks otherwise, it lies to you. Impermanence is the essence of life, and this very truth sets us free. Life is precious, life is fleeting. Live well. (Shihan Kenneth Tang)

Lord, remind me how brief my time on earth will be. Remind me that my days are numbered, and that my life is fleeing away. (Psalm 39:4)

You are living amidst the causes of death like a lamp standing in a strong breeze. (Nagarjuna)

Death is like an arrow that is already in flight, and your life lasts only until it reaches you. (Hermes Trismegistus)

What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. (James 4:14)
The Tibetan Sky Burial

First of all, it has to be said that this once common burial practice in Tibet is pretty hard to ‘digest’ for our ‘civilized’ world, and there’s a big chance you’ll find the picture shocking. As adepts of Buddhism, Tibetans believe the single most important part of a person is its spirit, and after death, there is no reason to preserve the body, which is just a hollow vessel. Also, wood is quite scarce and the soil is really rocky, making it hard to dig a grave. That’s pretty much why, after a somebody dies, the corpse was cut in specific locations and placed on a mountaintop where vultures feed off of it or it just decomposes.

For Tibetan Buddhists, sky burial and cremation are templates of instructional teaching on the impermanence of life.

Planning for the future is like going fishing in a dry gulch; nothing ever works out as you wanted, so give up all your schemes and ambitions. If you have got to think about something—make it the uncertainty of the hour of your death. (Gyalse Rinpoche)

When you are strong and healthy, you never think of sickness coming, but it descends with sudden force like a stroke of lightning. When involved in worldly things, you never think of death’s approach; quick it comes like thunder crashing round your head. (Milarepa)
Remember your contemporaries who have passed away and were of your age. Remember the honors and fame they earned, the high posts they held, and the beautiful bodies they possessed. Today all of them are turned to dust. They have left orphans and widows behind them, their wealth is being wasted, and their houses turned into ruins. No sign of them is left today, and they lie in the dark holes underneath the earth. Picture their faces before your mind’s eye and ponder. Do not fix hopes on your health, and do not laugh away life. Remember how they walked and now all their joints lie separated and the tongue with which they talked lightly is eaten away by the worms. (Al-Ghazzali)

Body lying flat on a last bed, voices whispering a few last words, mind watching a final memory glide past: When will that drama come for you? (Seventh Dalai Lama)

In the evening do not expect to live till morning, and in the morning do not expect evening. Prepare as long as you are in good health for sickness, and so long as you are alive for death. (Imam Nawawi)

In a man's life, his time is but a moment, his being a mere flux, his senses a dim glimpse, his body food for the worms, and his soul a restless eddy. The things of the body pass like a flowing stream; life is a brief sojourn, and one's mark in this world is soon forgotten. (Marcus Aurelius)

You live on earth for a few short years which you call an incarnation, and then you leave your body as an outworn dress and go for refreshment to your true home in the spirit. (White Eagle)
**Tibetan Buddhist – Sand Mandalas**

The historical Buddha, founder of Buddhism in India during the fifth century BCE, taught of the impermanence of existence. Buddhism came to the Tibetan region more than a thousand years later, in the seventh century CE. A central aim of Tibetan Buddhism is the liberation of all beings from suffering through insight into the nature of reality.

One tool for gaining insight is the creation of a mandala, which is designed as an intricate yet geometrically balanced composition. In their meditations, monks imagine a mandala as a three-dimensional palace in which Buddhist deities reside. Meditation includes identifying oneself with the mandala’s deities and leads to awareness of one’s own Buddha-like nature.

Mandalas may be made of many materials, but those constructed of sand or colored powder are unique to Tibetan Buddhism. After a great teacher chooses a specific mandala, monks consecrate the selected site with sacred chants and music, then they make a precise line drawing. They fill in the design with millions of grains of colored sand. During construction, monks chant, meditate, and ask for the healing blessings of the deities residing within the mandala.

At its completion, the mandala is consecrated and then swept up and dispersed to underscore the impermanent nature of existence. (from an internet article)

![Mandala construction](image)

No one can confidently say that he will still be living tomorrow. (Euripides)

Know this world to be an absorbing dream. In a moment it will vanish. Believe this. (Guru Teg Bahadur)
We say that the hour of death cannot be forecast, but when we say this we imagine that hour as placed in an obscure and distant future. It never occurs to us that it has any connection with the day already begun or that death could arrive this same afternoon, this afternoon which is so certain and which has every hour filled in advance. (Marcel Proust)

Kabir was discussing the importance of meditation with a procrastinating young disciple. Kabir told the young man, “Don’t delay any further, start meditating today.” The disciple said, “I’m too busy to start today. I’ll start tomorrow for certain.” Kabir responded, “How can you be certain you’ll be alive tomorrow? I’m not certain of my next in-breath!”

As soon as a man comes to life, he is immediately old enough to die. (Der Ackermann aus Bohmen)

The day a man is born, the day of his death is inscribed on his forehead. (Farid)

All things change; nothing perishes. (Ovid)

Nothing ever is, but is always becoming. (Plato)

The hour which gives us life begins to take it away. (Seneca)
All I know of life and myself is that we are just a midair flight of golden wine between His Pitcher and His Cup. (Hafiz)

The ship you are riding on, look where it is heading: Your body’s port is the graveyard. Realizing the destiny of each clay bowl tossed into the sky with no one to catch it I finally accepted the Beloved’s kind offer to enroll in His sublime course of Spirit Love. (Hafiz)

Long ago there was an eastern monarch who was bogged down by troubles and worries from everywhere. Distressed, he called his wise men together and asked them to find a mantra which could help him sail through the tough times. The mantra should hold true in adversity and prosperity. If a man wished, he could live his life guided by the mantra. He requested for the mantra to be so short that it could be inscribed on his ring, so that it could remain in front of his eyes forever. The wise men put in a lot of thought and finally found the magical mantra which would remain true forever – no matter what happened. The mantra they gave him was – “This, too, shall pass away.” (Attar)

Art thou in misery, brother? Then I pray be comforted. Thy grief shall pass away. Art thou elated? Ah, be not too gay; temper thy joy, this, too, shall pass away. Art thou in danger? Still let reason sway, and cling to hope: this, too, shall pass away. Tempted art thou? In all thine anguish lay one truth to heart: this, too, shall pass away. Do rays of loftier glory round these play? King-like art thou? This, too, shall pass away! Wherever thou art, wherever thy footsteps stray, heed these words: This too shall pass away! (Paul Hamilton Hayne)

Nothing endures but change. (Heraclitus)
There is an allusion in the epic Mahabharta that a question was once asked of King Yudhishtra by Yaksha: "What is the most amazing thing in the world?" The King replied: "Every day we see the people dying around us. Near and dear ones carry the dead body to the cremation ground or burial places. They even light the funeral pyre with their own hands. And yet men think they will never die." (Sant Kirpal Singh, ruhanisatsangusa.org/thinkofdeath.htm)

The day our allotted number of breaths expire, this body will fade away like a bubble of dew. And that time might arrive any minute…(Sant Kirpal Singh, ruhanisatsangusa.org/dieb4death.htm)

Nothing in the world is permanent, and we’re foolish when we ask anything to last, but surely we’re still more foolish not to take delight in it while we have it. (W. Somerset Maugham)

Your body is like a dew-drop on the morning grass, your life is as brief as a flash of lightning. Momentary and vain, it is lost in a moment. (Dogen Zenji)

Never halting night or day,  
My life drains constantly away,  
And from no other source does increase come.  
How can there not be death for such as me?  
(Shantideva)
In a man’s life, his time is but a moment, his being a mere flux, his senses a dim glimpse, his body food for the worms, and his soul a restless eddy … the things of the body pass like a flowing stream; life is a brief sojourn, and one’s mark in this world is soon forgotten. (Marcus Aurelius)

All the time life is passing away; time and tide wait for no man. After all, it is something like a pitcher full of water; drop by drop it is oozing out. Then what will happen? One day the pitcher will be empty; all the water will be out. Similarly, these numbers of breaths, or drops of water you might say, they are dropping out, one by one. We think we are getting old; truly speaking, we are growing young. A man who is to live fifty years, if he has passed ten years, he has forty years left; when twenty years have passed, he has only thirty years left; are you growing older or younger? It is going down! (Sant Kirpal Singh, http://www.ruhanisatsangusa.org/comeback.htm)

There is nothing that stands fast, nothing fixed, nothing free from change, among the things which come into being, neither among those in heaven nor among those on earth. God alone stands unmoved. (Hermes)

Do not allow death to disturb you, do not let the demise of flesh be the cause of pain or anguish. It is merely riddance of your vehicle, the sloughing off of your clothes. (Shantidasa)
It is difficult to accept death in this society because it is unfamiliar. In spite of the fact that it happens all the time, we never see it. (Elisabeth Kubler-Ross)

Today me, tomorrow you.
(Inscription on a burial plot)

O ye that move!
We too were like you once,
enjoying life to the full. But alas!
Now we are a handful of dust beneath this stone.
(Tombstone inscription)

Let death be daily before your eyes, and you will never entertain any abject thought, nor too eagerly covet anything. (Épictetus)

Many have died; you also will die. The drum of death is being beaten. The world has fallen in love with a dream. (Kabir)

The first sign of love to God is not to be afraid of death, and to be always waiting for it. For death unites the friend to his Friend – the seeker to the object which he seeks. (Al-Gahazzali)
The Impermanence of Beauty

Rupananda was quite an attractive and graceful woman who was always surrounded by admirers. She never ceased to feel very lonely, however, because all those dear to her—mother, brother, and even husband—had all entered the Order. Missing her family badly, she went to visit them often and heard them speak of the Buddha in such a way that she longed to go and pay him homage too.

But when she learned that the Buddha often talked about the impermanence of the body, she was afraid that he might disparage her for her beauty, and so hesitated to do so. In the end, however, she decided that no matter what the Buddha might say to her, she would go and see him anyway.

As soon as the Buddha saw Rupananda, he realized that she was someone very attached to her beauty. To teach her a lesson, he caused a vision of a ravishing young lady to appear before her. When Rupananda saw the young lady, she could not help but remark how extremely beautiful she was and exclaimed to herself, “My goodness, next to her I must look like an old crow!”

Then before Rupananda could realize what was happening, the beautiful young lady started to age and slowly deteriorate before her very eyes until she finally lay sick and helpless on the floor, rolling in her own excrement. Then she died, and Rupananda saw her corpse going through the different stages of decay, oozing pus and other foul liquids, and finally crawling with maggots.

Witnessing this rapid succession of images, Rupananda realized that there was a continuous process of change and decay in the body. “In the same way,” she thought, “like this young girl who has grown old, died, and decayed before my very eyes, I, too, will grow old and decay one day.”

With that realization, the attachment that Rupananda had for her body diminished and she came to perceive its true nature. She then became a nun, and under the guidance of the Buddha, eventually attained arahatship.

This body is built up with bones which are covered with flesh and blood. Within it dwell decay and death, pride and jealousy.
Outward beauty, loveliness of form, charm of personality, whether it is yours or possessed by another, is of no lasting worth. Be not allured by this false show. Be not deluded by these transitory qualities. Handsome or ugly, fair or dark, delicate or coarse, exquisite or plain in appearance, all the forms that you behold are born of dust. They are dolls of clay. They are fleeting forms that will soon vanish and be no more. They are exactly like garments that we have purchased at the vanity-fair of this world, but which have to be discarded before we depart. Your aim in life should be to transcend them. (Sawan Singh, Discourses on Sant Mat, 288, 289)

Little by little God takes away human beauty: little by little the sapling withers. Go recite, “To whomever we give a length of days, we also cause them to decline.” Seek the spirit; don’t set your heart on bones! (Rumi)

O Kabir, be not proud of these ugly bones wrapped in skin. Remember, even if you have elephants to ride on, with a canopy of royalty over your head, all too soon you will be buried deep and worms will make a meal of you. (Kabir)

Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. (Proverbs)

Discriminate and you will find that even the body of the most beautiful person consists of bones, fat, and other disagreeable things. Why should one give up God and direct his attention to such things? Why should he forget God for their sake? (Ramakrishna)
How confusing the beams from memory’s lamp are; one day a bachelor, the next a grampa. What is the secret of the trick? How did I get so old so quick? (Ogden Nash)

It is not death that a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live. (Marcus Aurelius)

Awareness of death is the very bedrock of the Path. Until you have developed this awareness, all other practices are obstructed. (Dalai Lama)

Before we know it our life is finished and it is time to die. If we lack the foundation of a stable practice, we go to death helplessly, in fear and anguish. (Kyabje Kalu Rinpoche)
In order to counteract the mistaken notion that this life is permanent, Buddha taught meditation on death. The main reasons for his doing so can be understood by considering what happens when you are not mindful of death. Most of the people in this world who are stirring up trouble, ruining their lives and those of others, have a strong and mistaken sense of their own permanence. Believing that they, and their relatives, and their friends will stay around for a long time, and thinking that their own happiness can be stable and permanent, they concentrate on promoting their own group at the expense of any other, and engage in many activities that bring ruin to others and themselves.

The assumption that we will be around for a long time, as if we were permanent, undermines both self and others by creating counterproductive ideas and endeavors. The responsibility for this rests solely on our mistaken view of permanence, on not being aware of death. If you remain aware that your own death can happen at any time, you will not fall into so much trouble. Mindful that your own death is inevitable, you will be drawn into thinking about whether there is a future life. Even if you only suspect that there is, you will take interest in the quality of that life, of what it might be like. This will lead you to think about karma – the cause and effect of actions – drawing you away from choosing activities of a harmful nature and encouraging you to engage in activities that are beneficial. This itself will lend your life a positive purpose.

In addition, if you avoid the mere mention of death as if it were off limits, then on the day when death comes, you may become frightened and uncomfortable. However, if you contemplate the fact that death is something that happens naturally, this can make a big difference. When you become familiar with death, you can make preparations for dying, and decide what you should do with your mind at that time. Then on that day your preparation will have its effect; you will think “Ah, death has come,” and act as you planned, free from fright.
Imminence of Death

*Now is the time to make ourselves different from domesticated animals.*
(The Great Tibetan Yogi Jangchup Tinchen)

Meditation on the imminence of death takes place by way of three root reflections, each of which is based on three reasons, leading to a decision. Here is a summary, followed by a step-by-step explanation.

First root: Contemplation that death is definite

1. because death cannot be avoided
2. because our life span cannot be extended and grows ever shorter
3. because even when we are alive there is little time to practice.

**First Decision: I Must Practice**

Second root: Contemplation that the time of death is uncertain

4. because our life span in this world is indefinite
5. because the causes of death are many and the causes of life are few
6. because the time of death is unknowable due to the fragility of the body.

**Second Decision: I Must Practice Now**

Third root: Contemplation that at the time of death nothing helps except transformative practice

7. because at the time of death our friends are no help
8. because at the time of death our wealth is no help
9. because at the time of death our body is no help.

**Third Decision: I Will Practice Nonattachment To All Of The Wonderful Things Of This Life**
Death is Definite

Once something is produced, whether it is an object in the external world or a being living in it, it gradually moves toward destruction. According to some cosmologists, it has been twenty-five billion years since the big bang, the cataclysmic explosion that gave birth to our universe; others say twelve billion, while still others posit seventeen or eighteen. In any case, there was a beginning to this universe, and thus it is certain that at some point it will come to an end. Even mountains that have been here for millions of years are eroding moment by moment, so, similarly, the beings living in this world, who are far more fragile than mountains, are inexorably moving toward death moment by moment.

Our bodies rely on a set of conditions so complicated that even a small deviation can create a problem. If our bodies were just filled with fluid, that would be one thing, but the human body is extremely complex; each of our five major organs – heart, lungs, liver, spleen, and kidneys – depends on its respective system, which, if thrown out of balance, can cause problems. Relative to solid objects, our bodies are fragile and require continuous maintenance.

Tough humans have existed in this world for around a million years, no one has successfully avoid the fate of death, and neither will we. Death is definite. As Buddha said:

*The varieties of lives in the world are impermanent like autumn clouds.*
*The birth and death of beings are like watching a dance.*
*The passage of life is like lightning in the sky.*
*It moves quickly, like a waterfall.*

The certainty of dying calls us to engage in spiritual practice.
The Time of Death Is Uncertain

We all know in the back of our minds that we will die, but we keep thinking that this will not happen for a long time. Right until the moment we actually die, we think that it will not happen for quite a while yet. This attitude causes us to put off achieving the great aim of real lasting happiness.

Since the illusion of permanence fosters procrastination, it is crucial to reflect repeatedly on the fact that death could come at any time. Our lives are fragile, and even things that usually sustain life, such as medicine and cars, can turn into causes of death. As Nagarjuna says in his Precious Garland of Advice:

*You are living amidst the causes of death*
*Like a lamp standing in a strong breeze.*

The fragility of life calls us to make a decision to implement spiritual practice right now. Spiritual practice is not physical. Although both physical and verbal virtuous actions are important, spiritual practice is a matter of mental transformation. This means not just understanding something new but suffusing your mental continuum with this knowledge in order to tame your unruly mind and put it in service of virtue. This means that you must practice now. If you do whatever you can at the present juncture to transform your mind, then even sickness and pain while you are dying will not disturb the strong sense of peace, firm like a mountain, deep in your mind.

At Death Nothing Helps Except Having Practiced

Successful practice is essential. If we consider how we usually spend our days, most of us practice just a little, muttering a few mantras, and if we are at ease, we think a little bit about “all sentient beings,” but if we get the least bit stirred up, we fight with others, deceive them, and lose sight of our spiritual aspirations. This sort of sporadic activity is not real practice, for it is unable to influence more intense situations. By overemphasizing our own temporary comfort, we lose sight of the long-term goal.

When things are going well, it is easy to take on the outward appearance of calm through meditation, but the slightest ruffle in the environment exposes how superficial our attempts are. If, while we are still alive, our practice is not effective at times of need, then it will be difficult for it to have much effect at the time of death. This is why it is necessary to practice in such a way that you are profoundly affected.

Put persistent effort over months and years into actually affecting your outlook, perspective, and attitudes. In time you will find that although your body is essentially the same, your mind has undergone profound change. After this transformation, no matter what unfavorable circumstances arise, these events will serve to build character, advance your spiritual practice, and accelerate your progress toward enlightenment. At this point, you are a real practitioner.
Nothing can be accomplished after death in the way of spiritual liberation unless it is at least begun during this life. (Santon ki Shiksha)

The day is now ended, our lives are shorter. Now we look carefully at what have we done. Let us be diligent; let us live deeply, free from our afflictions, aware of impermanence so that life does not drift away without meaning. (Thich Nhat Hahn)

Few are the wise ones who turn the heart away from worldly objects, and spend their time in gathering riches for the life beyond, before departure from this lonely earth. (Ansari of Herat)

The death of someone we know always reminds us that we are still alive - perhaps for some purpose which we ought to re-examine. (Mignon McLaughlin)
Human beings spend all their lives preparing, preparing, preparing – only to meet the next life unprepared. (Drakpa GyaltSEN)

The worm is in the root of the body’s tree; travelers, it is late! Life’s sun is going to set. During these brief days that you have strength, be quick and spare no effort of your wings. (Rumi)

In the dead of night, a Sufi began to weep. He said, "This world is like a closed coffin, in which We are shut and in which, through our ignorance, We spend our lives in folly and desolation. When Death comes to open the lid of the coffin, Each one who has wings will fly off to Eternity, But those without will remain locked in the coffin. So, my friends, before the lid of this coffin is taken off, Do all you can to become a bird of the Way to God; Do all you can to develop your wings and your feathers. (Attar)

This world is swept away by aging, by illness, by death. For one swept on by aging no shelters exist. Keeping sight of this danger in death, do meritorious deeds that bring bliss. Make merit while alive. (Buddha)

No university will teach you how to live so that when the time of dying comes, you can say: “I lived well, I do not need to live again.” (Nisargadatta)

You should strive for a readiness to die! Be certain and ready; when the time comes, you will have no fear and no regret. (Milarepa)

Procrastination is the thief of time. "All right, I'll do it tomorrow, the day after." "Let me finish this work, then I'll devote time." Suppose you die today, where will you stand? (Sant Kirpal Singh, ruhanisatsangusa.org/lok/riseabov.htm)

The journey may be long but has to be completed. Life is running out; let not vain pursuits deflect us from our Noble Path. (The Teachings of Kirpal Singh, v. 3, 170)
So I submit to you, as a man you've got the heritage, the right to know God. If you don't utilize that, that's a misfortune. Even when God affords somebody the opportunity to be put on the way, and with all that they don't do it, then it's a great misfortune. So procrastination is the thief of time. This is what we do: I'll start it when such and such work is finished. I'll do it when I'm retired. I'll do it when that thing is done first." Well, who knows if you'll live longer until that time? So Masters say that those who do not care while young, when their brain, their memory, their body is fit; then who can do it in old age, when the hairs are quite white? The point is, if you have not lived a normal chaste life, or have misused this life, then who knows if you'll be able to see Him in your old age? You will become deaf; your eyesight will become shortened, lessened; you won't be able to walk. Then can you do it? (Sant Kirpal Singh, Ruhanisatsangusa.org/gohome.htm)

What guarantee have you of life? Your body may be destroyed in a single moment. Therefore, with every breath remember the Name of the Lord and discard every other thought. As long as there is life, continue fearlessly repeating the One Lord’s True Name. When the oil of life is exhausted and the wick of the lamp extinguished, there then will be quite time enough to sleep both day and night. (Kabir)

Your prayers were light and your worship peaceful, your sleep an enemy of prayer. Your life was a test, but you let it go by without a thought. It’s ever-passing, slowly vanishes before you know it. (Rabia)

It was related of Rabia Basri that every day at dawn she used to say, “This is the day on which I shall die,” and she would not sleep until evening. Then when night fell, she would say, “This is the night during which I shall die,” and she would not sleep until morning came. When the cold weather came, she would dress in thin garments so that the cold should prevent her from sleeping, so that she could do her devotions. (Kabir: the Great Mystic, 256)

Up, sluggard, and waste not life; in the grave will be sleeping enough. (Benjamin Franklin)

Since this body of complete leisure and opportunity was very difficult to get, and once obtained will be very difficult to have again, make it meaningful by striving at practice. (Atisha)

O Kabir, why do you slumber? Arise, awake, and remember the Merciful, for the day is not distant when you will sleep the long sleep with both legs fully stretched. (Kabir)
Oh, the last fulfillment of life, Death, my death, come and whisper to me! Day after day I have kept watch for you; for you have I borne the joys and pangs of life. All that I am, that I have, that I hope and all my love have ever flowed towards you in depth of secrecy. One final glance from your eyes and my life will be ever your own. The flowers have been woven and the garland is ready for the bridegroom. After the wedding the bride shall leave her home and meet her Lord alone in the solitude of night.

I know that the day will come when my sight of this earth shall be lost, and life will take its leave in silence, drawing the last curtain over my eyes. Yet stars will watch at night, and morning rise as before and hours heave like sea waves casting up pleasures and pains. When I think of this end of my moments, the barrier of the moments breaks, and I see by the light of death your world with its careless treasures. Rare is its lowliest seat, rare is its meanest of lives. Things that I longed for in vain and things that I got - let them pass. Let me but truly possess the things that I ever spurned and overlooked.

I have got my leave. Bid me farewell, my brothers! I bow to you all and take my departure. Here I give back the keys of my door - and I give up all claims to my house. I only ask for last kind words from you. We were neighbors for long, but I received more than I could give. Now the day has dawned and the lamp that lit my dark corner is out. A summons has come and I am ready for my journey.

I was not aware of the moment when I first crossed the threshold of this life. What was the power that made me open out into this vast mystery like a bud in the forest at midnight! When in the morning I looked upon the light I felt in a moment that I was no stranger in this world, that the inscrutable without name and form had taken me in its arms in the form of my own mother. Even so, in death the same unknown will appear as ever known to me. And because I love this life, I know I shall love death as well. The child cries out when from the right breast the mother takes it away, in the very next moment to find in the left one its consolation.

On the day when death will knock at your door what will you offer to him? Oh, I will set before my guest the full vessel of my life - I will never let him go with empty hands. All the sweet vintage of all my autumn days and summer nights, all the earnings and gleanings of my busy life will I place before him at the close of my days when death will knock at my door.
The Voyage of Life

_The Voyage of Life_ series, painted by Thomas Cole in 1842, is a series of paintings that represent an allegory of the four stages of human life: childhood, youth, manhood, and old age. The paintings follow a voyager who travels in a boat on a river through the mid-19th century American wilderness. In each painting, accompanied by a guardian angel, the voyager rides the boat on the River of Life. The landscape, corresponding to the seasons of the year, plays a major role in telling the story. In each picture, the boat's direction of travel is reversed from the previous picture. In childhood, the infant glides from a dark cave into a rich, green landscape. As a youth, the boy takes control of the boat and aims for a shining castle in the sky. In manhood, the adult relies on prayer and religious faith to sustain him through rough waters and a threatening landscape. Finally, the man becomes old and the angel guides him to heaven across the waters of eternity. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Voyage_of_Life](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Voyage_of_Life))

**Childhood**

See him, the new-born, dirty but marvelous, ridiculous in actuality, infinite in possibility, capable of the ultimate mystery – growth. Can you conceive it – that his queer bundle of sound and pain will come to know love, anxiety, prayer, suffering, creation, metaphysics, death? He cries; he has been so long asleep in the quiet warm womb of his mother; now suddenly he is compelled to breathe, and it hurts; compelled to see light, and it pierces him; compelled to hear noise, and it terrifies him. Cold strikes his skin, and he seems to be all pain. But it is not so; nature protects him against this initial onslaught of the world by covering him with a general insensitivity. He see the light only dimly, he hears the sounds as muffled and coming from afar. For the most part he sleeps.
Youth is the transition from play to work, from dependence on the family to dependence of one’s self. It is a little anarchic and egotistic, because in the family its every whim or want was favored by unstinting parental love. Passing into the world, youth, petted for years and now for the first time free, drinks in the deep delight of liberty, utters its wild barbaric yawp, and advances to conquer and remold the world.

It is the age of abandon, and its motto is “Nothing succeeds like excess.” It is never tired; it lives in the present, regrets no yesterdays, and dreads no morrow; it climbs buoyantly a hill whose summit conceals the other side. It is the age of sharp sensation and unchilled desire; experience is not soured yet with repetition and disillusionment; to have sensations at all is then a glorious thing.

Finally, youth discovers love. It has known “calf-love,” that ethereal prelude to the coming symphonies of flesh and soul; and it has known the lonely struggles of premature and uninformed desire. But these were only harmless preliminaries that would deepen the spirit and make it ready for the self-abandonment of devotion. See them in love, this boy and this girl; is there any evil this side of mortality that can balance the splendor of this good? The girl suddenly made quiet and thoughtful as the stream of life rises to conscious creation in her; the youth eager and restless, and yet all courtesy and gentleness, knowing all the luxuries of courtship, aflame with something based in the hunger of the blood and yet rising to tenderness and loyalty. Here is a fulfillment of long centuries of civilization and culture; here, in romantic love, more than in the triumphs of thought or the victories of power, is the topmost reach of man.
And so youth marries, and youth ends. A married man is already five years older the next day, and a married woman too. Biologically, middle age begins with marriage; for then work and responsibility replace care-free play, passion surrenders to the limitations of social order.

As we find a place in the economic world the rebellion of youth subsides. We forget our radicalism then in a gentle liberalism – which is radicalism softened with the consciousness of a bank-account.

Partly the increased conservatism of middle age is the result of intelligence, which perceives the complexity of institutions and the imperfections of desire; but partly it is the result of lowered energy, and corresponds to the immaculate morality of exhausted men. We perceive, at first incredulously and then with despair, that the reservoir of strength no longer fills itself after we draw upon it.

The discovery darkens life for some years; we begin to mourn the brevity of the human span, and the impossibility of wisdom or fulfillment within so limited a circle; we stand at the top of the hill, and without straining our eyes we can see, at its bottom, death. We had not admitted its existence before; it was an abstract and academic notion which no strong man would ponder. But suddenly it is there, relentlessly before us; and try as we will we slip down the hill within its reach.
Old Age

What is old age? Fundamentally, no doubt, it is a condition of the flesh, or protoplasm that finds inevitably the limit of its life. It is a physiological and psychological involution. It is hardening of the arteries and categories, a retardation of thought and blood; a man is as old as his arteries and as young as his ideas.

Just as the child grew more rapidly the younger it was, so the old man ages more quickly with every day. And just as the child was protected by insensitivity on its entry into the world, so old age is eased by an apathy of sense and will, and nature slowly administers a general anesthesia before she permits time’s scythe to complete the most major of operations. As sensations diminish in intensity, the sense of vitality fades; the desire for life gives way to indifference and patient waiting; the fear of death is strangely mingled with the longing for repose. Perhaps then, if one has lived well, if one has known the full term of love and all the juice and ripeness of experience, one can die with some measure of content, clearing the stage for a better play.

Here is an old man on the bed of death, harassed with helpless friends and wailing relatives. What a terrible sight it is – this thin frame with loosened and cracking flesh, this toothless mouth in a bloodless face, this tongue that cannot speak, these eyes that cannot see! To this pass youth has come, after all its hopes and trials; to this pass middle age, after all its torment and its toil. To this pass health and strength and joyous rivalry; this arm once struck great blows and fought for victory in virile games. To this pass knowledge, science, wisdom: for seventy years this man with pain and effort gathered knowledge; his brain became the storehouse of a varied experience, the center of a thousand subtleties of thought and deed; his heart through suffering learned gentleness as his mind learned understanding; seventy years he grew from an animal into a man capable of seeking truth and creating beauty. But death is upon him, poisoning him, choking him, congealing his blood, gripping his heart, bursting his brain, rattling in his throat. Death wins.
Outside on the green boughs birds twitter, and the rooster sings his hymn to the sun. Light streams across the fields; buds open and stalks confidently lift their heads; the sap mounts in the trees. Here are children: what is it that makes them so joyous, running madly over the dew-wet grass, laughing, calling, pursuing, eluding, panting for breath, inexhaustible? They will learn and grow and love and struggle and create, and lift life up one little notch, perhaps, before they die. And when they pass they will cheat death with children, with parental care that will make their offspring finer than themselves. There in the garden’s twilight lovers pass, thinking themselves unseen; their quiet words mingle with the murmur of insects calling to their mates; the ancient hunger speaks through eager and through lowered eyes, and a noble madness courses through clasped hands and touching lips. Life wins.

This mountain of release is such that the ascent is most painful at the start, below;
The more you rise, the milder it will be.
And when the slope feels gentle to the point that climbing up sheer rock is effortless
As though you were gliding downstream in a boat,
Then you will have arrived where this path ends.

(Dante)
Kabir

Of but a short span, O Kabir, is this life here,
But how elaborate is your preparation for it!
All, whether they be prince or pauper,
Are filled with anxiousness about their worldly future.
How strange it is that no one seems to care
About their future, which is Everlasting Life.

Remember, one day you’ll be parted from all worldly things,
However high your state and fame may be.
Why not awaken to this fact,
And start remembering the Lord, the ever Merciful?

Fragile is this frail body, frail indeed,
Fragile it is, just like an earthen vessel;
And nothing of it then is left behind.
Remember, you will leave here empty-handed,
For you can carry nothing with you to the worlds beyond.

All who are born must die,
Whether a prince, a pauper or a true holy man;
But some among them all will rise to the Divine Throne,
While others will be fettered,
And imprisoned like vile criminals.

Friend, hope for the Guest while you are alive.
Jump into experience while you are alive!
Think, and think, while you are alive.
What you call “salvation” belongs to the time before death.
If you don’t break your ropes while you are alive, do you think ghosts will do it after?
The idea that the soul will join with the ecstatic just because the body is rotten –
that is all fantasy.
What is found now is found then.
If you find nothing now, you will simply end up with an apartment in the City of Death.
If you make love with the divine now, in the next life you will have the face of satisfied desire.
Kabir says this: When the Guest is being searched for, it is the intensity of the longing
for the Guest that does all the work.

The trouble with you is you think you have time.
(Buddha)
Where does poetry live? In the overpowering felt splendor every sane mind knows when it realizes - our life dance is only for a few magic seconds, from the heart saying, shouting, “I am so damn alive!” (Hafiz)

Death plucks my ear and says, “Live - I am coming.”
(Virgil)

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