Maranasati
Mindfulness of death

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Summary

1. *Sources*
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5. *Effects*
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Sources

Early Buddhist texts

- *Anguttara Nikaya* (6. 19-20): two discourses: «Maranasati Sutta».
- *Vimuttimagga* (VII, VIII, IV): short and concise presentation.
- *Visuddhimagga* (II, VIII, 7, 1-41): extremely detailed presentation.

Theory

Four Noble Truths	Noble Eightfold Path	Threefold Training
1. Reality of suffering	1. Right Speech	1. Morality
2. Cause of suffering	2. Right Action	
3. Cessation of suffering	3. Right Livelihood	
4. Path towards cessation	4. Right Effort	2. Concentration
	5. Right Mindfulness	
	6. Right Concentration	
	7. Right View	3. Wisdom
	8. Right Intention	

40 meditation subjects → 10 recollections → Recollection (mindfulness) of death

Theory

Definitions

- *Mindfulness:* the practice or ability of keeping something in mind.
- *Death:* the interruption of the life faculty included within a single being.
- *Mindfulness of death:* the practice of focusing on the thought of death.

Principle

The aim of the practice

«The Blessed One said, “Mindfulness of death, when developed and pursued, is of great fruit and great benefit. It gains a footing in the Deathless, has the Deathless as its final end. Therefore, you should develop mindfulness of death.”» [AN 6.19]

Principle

Determination of the Deathless

«One thing — when developed and pursued — leads solely to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to Unbinding. Which one thing? Mindfulness of death.» [AN 1.294]

Method

The meditator should:

- Retreat in a quiet and solitary place.
- Assume the correct meditation posture.
- Focus attention on the object.
    - Imagine a dead body.
    - Compare the dead body to his/her own.
- Repeat «I shall die» or «Death, death».
- Avoid positive or negative feelings about death.

Method

Ways of meditating on death:

1. Death as a murderer.
2. Death as the ruin of success.
3. Death in comparison with famous people.
4. The body as abode and targets of many.
5. Death as to the frailty of life.
6. Death as signless (unpredictable).
7. The shortness of a lifetime.
8. A lifetime as a single moment.

Effects

1. **On meditation**
   - Overcomes the hindrances.
   - Attains access concentration.
2. **On knowledge**
   - Gains perception of impermanence.
   - Acquires perception of non-self.
3. **On life practice**
   - Develops a sense of urgency.
   - Focuses on skillful / unskillful qualities.
   - Abandons attachment to life.

Effects

Results of studies on mindfulness of death:

- Decreasing death anxiety.
- Decreasing fear of death and dying of oneself and others.
- Increasing mindfulness and self-compassion.
- Increasing pro-social attitudes based on ethics and morality.
- Increasing focus on values like meaning of life and happiness.

Relevance

Final reflection

- Mindfulness of death is unpopular in the West.
  Perhaps because death is hidden or neglected.

- As a consequence, we assume an incorrect attitude towards life.
  But this attitude generates suffering.

- *Therefore, mindfulness of death should be practised!*

Thanks for your attention!

Cover Slide – Text

With this presentation, I would like to introduce a kind of Buddhist meditation practice, which is called «maranasati», meaning recollection of death or mindfulness of death.
This meditative practice is as ancient as Buddhism itself, because it was taught by the Buddha himself to his disciples twenty-five centuries ago.

Summary (Slide 01/11) – Text

I am going to develop this presentation through these six main steps.
I will start by introducing the main early Buddhist sources which describes «maranasati» (mindfulness of death).
Secondly, I will present the theoretical framework, where the practice of mindfulness of death gains its meaning.
Next step, I will outline the general principle which this meditation practice is based on.
After a description of its method and procedures, I will focus on the intended effects of this practice.
Finally, I will conclude this presentation by highlighting the relevance of mindfulness of death.

Sources (Slide 02/11) – Text

Regarding textual sources, there are at least three main Buddhist texts which introduce and describe mindfulness of death.

The first text is the sixth book of the «Anguttara Nikaya», where two discourses of the Buddha, addressed to his monks, are explicitly dedicated to mindfulness of death. For this reason, these discourses taken together are called «maranasati sutta» (meaning discourse on the mindfulness of death). They are the earliest Buddhist discourses where the term «maranasati» appears. In them, the Buddha provides the very basics of this type of meditation. **[1]**

A second text presenting mindfulness of death is the Vimuttimagga, «The Path of Freedom» by Upatissa (I-II century CE). Here, the practice is explained through a concise series of questions and answers. As a result, the practice is described in a very short and essential way, as a sort of pocket manual for meditators. **[2]**

Finally, mindfulness of death is presented in the Visuddhimagga, «The Path of Purification» by Buddhaghosa (V century CE), which was probably influenced by the Vimutimagga. Particularly, the practice is described in the book's second part, which is devoted to the practices leading to meditative concentration. Being a sort of complete handbook for meditation, this text develops the features of mindfulness of death in extreme details. **[3]**

In what follows, I will base the presentation of mindfulness of death on these three primary Buddhist sources, but I will rely on secondary sources as well when I believe that some integration is useful.

Theory (Slide 03/11) – Text

With this diagram, I have tried to outline the theoretical framework of mindfulness of death.

As we know, the Four Noble Truths declared by the Buddha are the reality of suffering, the existence of a cause of suffering (that is generally ignorance, hatred, or greed), the possibility of extinguishing suffering, and the existence of a method which leads to the liberation from suffering. This method, known as the Noble Eightfold Path, consists of eight practices, which are grouped in a threefold training on morality, concentration, and wisdom. In particular, the cultivation of the sixth practice – the right concentration – helps the meditator to calm his or her mind by removing the mental obstacles which prevent the meditator from attaining the correct state of mind and, consequently, the liberation from suffering. **[4]**

To attain right concentration, Buddhist tradition admits forty subjects on which the meditator can focus his or her mind. **[5]** Among these many subjects, there is a group of ten meditation subjects – called “ten recollections” – among which there are the recollections of Buddha, virtue, peace, body, breath – and death. Then, right concentration can be gained through practicing the so-called recollection of death or, perhaps more properly, mindfulness of death. **[6]**

In summary, mindfulness of death is a meditative practice having death as its object. Its goal is to develop right concentration, which allows the meditator to purify his or her mind. The purification of mind is a mandatory stage on the path towards the liberation from suffering. **[7]**

Theory (Slide 04/11) – Text

I believe that some definitions can help us to theoretically understand the practice of mindfulness of death.

The term ‘mindfulness’ does not mean simply ‘awareness’, but the Buddha himself understands mindfulness as the practice or ability of firmly and attentively focusing your mind on particular themes or intentions. The goal of this mindful practice is to induce those mental states necessary for concentration. **[8]**

Additionally, both the Vimuttimagga and the Visuddhimagga define ‘death’ as ‘the interruption of the life faculty included within a single being’. Therefore, in this definition it is implicit the idea that death can occur to living beings. **[9]**

In summary, based on the previous definitions, we can state that mindfulness of death is the meditation practice of keeping in mind or recollecting that death (that is, the interruption of life faculty) occurs for any living being. **[10]**

Principle (Slide 05/11) – Text

The basic principle which explains mindfulness of death is that this practice accompanies the meditator to a final state, the so-called «Deathless».
This idea has been stated clearly by the Buddha in the Anguttara Nikaya, where it reads: «The Blessed One [that is, the Buddha] said, “Mindfulness of death, when developed and pursued, is of great fruit and great benefit. It gains a footing in the Deathless, has the Deathless as its final end. Therefore, you should develop mindfulness of death.”».

As this passage suggests, mindfulness of death does not have death as its purpose nor meditating on death as an end in itself.
On the contrary, the thought of death is nothing but a starting point, while the practice of frequently keeping in mind this thought is only a means.

As mentioned in this passage, the real and correct objective of the practice is to reach the state of Deathless. Mindfulness of death allows the meditator to approach that state, where not only is death no longer the focus, but also the thought of death has been overcome.

Principle (Slide 06/11) – Text

But what is the state of Deathless more precisely?
In a previous passage of the Anguttara Nikaya, the Buddha further explains the principle of mindfulness of death by determining the features of the Deathless.

The passage reads as follows: «One thing — when developed and pursued — leads solely to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to Unbinding. Which one thing? Mindfulness of death».

Through this passage, the Buddha determines the state of Deathless as the condition where the meditator has gained the firm ground of enlightenment or self-awakening. By attaining states as disenchantment, dispassion, and direct knowledge, the meditator has abandoned illusions, false notions, passions and attachment – which, according to the Buddha's teachings, are thoughts and dispositions that generate suffering. **[11]**

In summary, we can state that mindfulness of death is the practice which conducts the meditator to the state of Deathless, and the state of Deathless is such that the meditator is released from suffering. Therefore, the purpose of this practice is to lead the meditator to the cessation of suffering. For this reason, the state of Deathless can be equated to the state of Unbinding – that is, the liberation from the bonds of suffering.

Method (Slide 07/11) – Text

How should we practice mindfulness of death? The method of practicing this type of meditation is outlined in both the Vimuttimagga and the Visuddhimagga.
Both texts agree that we should retreat in a quite and solitary place, where we should assume the correct and comfortable meditation posture.
Silence and solitude of the quite place can help us concentrate on the meditation object we have chosen (death, in this case) and avoid the wandering of mind.

At this point, to make meditation on death more accessible, some commentators suggest that we imagine an external corpse. Then, we should reflect on the fact that our body does have the same nature of that corpse, so that neither our body can escape death. This will make us aware of our own mortality. **[12]**
Once reached this awareness, we should repeat thoughts like “I will certainly die”, or “Death, death”. This will allow us to keep focused on – and mindful of – our own mortality. **[13]**

When focusing on our or someone else’s death, it is important to avoid the arising of strong feelings like sorrow, anxiety, fear, or gladness. As a matter of fact, these feelings prevent us from gaining the beneficial effects of practicing mindfulness of death (like the development of a sense of urgency, as we will see later). **[14]**

Method (Slide 08/11) – Text

If this method is insufficient to gain concentration, both the Vimuttimagga and the Visuddhimagga enumerate and analyze eight ways of recollecting death. These are eight different point of views under which death could be recalled. Although the two lists of eight ways are slightly divergent in the two texts, both aim at highlighting the many aspects of death and the many ways it could be recollected. **[15]**

- First, considering death as a murderer, because death can take away life at any moment.
- Second, considering death as the ruin of success, because it is the final ruining of life.
- Third, considering death by comparison with famous or eminent people (included the enlightened ones) and realizing that even these people eventually died.
- Fourth, considering the body as the abode – and the target – of countless possible, internal and external, causes of death.
- Fifth, considering the difficulty of staying alive, because life is a fragile balance.
- Sixth, considering death as signless – that is, death is an unpredictable event.
- Seventh, considering the brevity of a lifetime, which for humans rarely lasts longer than one hundred years.
- Eighth, considering the fact that one's lifetime is like a single thought or moment of consciousness.

In particular, the fourth and seventh ways are very close to the Buddha's discourse in the Anguttara Nikaya, where he teaches his monks how to diligently meditate on death. There, the Buddha recalls that death can strike in various ways, and it can occur rapidly and at any moment, even in the timespan of a breath. **[16]**

Effects (Slide 09/11) – Text

Regarding the effects of mindfulness of death, based on my understanding of the Buddhist sources, the practice can lead to three types of effects: on the meditative practice itself, on a meditator's knowledge, and on a meditator's way of living.

Firstly, related to meditation itself, mindfulness of death is meant to calm the mind up to the point that the meditator can suppress the five mental hindrances (sensory desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt). With this practice, the meditator can reach the state of access concentration – that is, a state of initial, deep concentration where the mind gains unification by focusing on one single object. **[17]**

Secondly, related to knowledge, mindfulness of death can enlighten the meditator with some of the foundations of the Buddha's teachings like the perception of impermanence (that is, the idea that nothing permanently exists, but everything is subject to change) and the perception of non-self (that is, the idea that the meditator is empty of an unchanging core of personality, like a soul). **[18]**

Effects (Slide 09/11) – Text (continued)

Finally, related to life practice, mindfulness of death allows the meditator to develop a sense of urgency, since there is no way of knowing how much time is left for us to live. For this reason, as the Buddha claims in the Anguttara Nikaya (6.20), the diligent person, who realizes that death can strike at any moment, meditates on death to investigate which mental qualities must be rejected because they are unskillful, and which mental qualities should be improved because they are skillful. Additionally, by realizing that life is impermanent, the meditator abandons the idea of attachment to life. By abandoning the attachment to life, the fear or terror of death fades away, and with fear and terror disappears the suffering related to them. **[19]**

In summary, the effects of mindfulness of death are several and beneficial. Not only does the practice purifies the meditator's mind, but also it urges the meditator to disregard unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones. In this way, the meditator is never afraid of the moment of death. On the contrary, the meditator is always well trained and prepared for facing that situation with calm and tranquility. **[20]**

Effects (Slide 10/11) – Text

By following the classic Buddhist sources, contemporary scientific research has long discovered the positive psychological impact of meditation, especially those practices based on mindfulness and concentration. **[21]**

However, scientific research has only recently begun to investigate the effects of mindfulness of death on meditators.
Even in this case, though, researchers have confirmed the beneficial effects of practising such a type of meditation.

I would not go into many details here, but let me emphasize some benefits confirmed by researchers.
Mindfulness of death has been acknolwedged to impact positively on:

- Reducing death anxiety. **[22]**
- Decreasing fear of death and dying of oneself and others. **[23]**
- Increasing mindfulness and self-compassion. **[23]**
- Increasing pro-social attitudes based on ethics and morality. **[24]**
- Increasing focus on values like meaning of life and happiness. **[24]**

This brief list of scientific outcomes seems to confirm some of the positive effects intended by the Buddha and described in the traditional Buddhist texts.

Relevance (Slide 11/11) – Text

To conclude, I would like to make a brief reflection on the relevance of mindfulness of death.

Among the many types of mindful meditation practised in the Western countries (for example, mindfulness of breathing or of body), mindfulness of death does not seem to be very popular or widespread. This might depend on the fact that, especially in Western societies, the event of death, as well as the process of dying, are often hidden or neglected, because they generally give rise to depressing or pessimistic thoughts.

As a result of neglecting the awareness of death, many Western citizens tend to conduct their lives as if they were permanent and everlasting, which is an attitude that the Buddha himself warned against, because it is based on ignorance, it produces suffering, and it distracts from developing our best mental skills. For this reason, the Buddha taught mindfulness of death to his disciples: not to induce paranoia or obsession about death, but to cultivate a calm awareness of the impermanence of life despite the uncertainity of the time of death, as well as its inevitability.

As we have seen, this meditative practice on death does not necessarily lead to negative thoughts, nor does it relate to morbidity. Quite on the contrary, the Buddhist mindfulness of death is a practice that should be discussed and enacted, since it can help us to re-gain that sense of mortality, which can encourage us to prioritise what is important in life, and to reach the highest achievements of human beings.

Footnotes

[1] See Thanissaro [2013].

[2] See the Vimuttimagga, fascicle VII, chapter VIII, section IV (pp. 166-170).

[3] See the Visuddhimagga, part II, chapter VIII, section 7, parr. 1-41 (pp. 225-236).

[4] For a detailed introduction of the Buddha's teachings, especially to the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, see Mahathera [1998], Bodhi [1999] and Gowans [2003, pp. 117-200].

[5] For an analysis of the concept of concentration, see Bodhi [1980, pp. 38-40; 1999, pp. 86-97].

[6] For the difference between «mindfulness» (*sati*) and «recollection» (*anussati*), see Thanissaro [2013].

[7] For an analysis of the purification of mind, see Nanarama [1993, pp. 23-42] and Moneyya [2006, pp. 19-26].

[8] See the introduction of Thanissaro [2013].

Footnotes (continued)

[9] See the Vimuttimagga, p. 166-167, and the Visuddhimagga, p. 225-226. Additionally, the two texts distinguish between various types of death, for example timely death (due to internal causes like the exhaustion of a life span) and untimely death (due to external causes like murdering). On the Buddhist concept of death, see O'Connell Walshe [1978] and Gunaratna [2010].

[10] See the Vimuttimagga: «The cutting off of the life-faculty — this is called death. The undisturbed mindfulness of this — this is called the practising of it» (p. 166), and the Visuddhimagga: «So mindfulness of death is the remembering of death, in other words, of the interruption of the life faculty» (p. 226).

[11] For an analysis of concepts like disenchantment, dispassion, and knowledge, see Bikkhu [1980].

[12] See for example Sayadaw [1998, pp. 103-105]; Sayadaw [2000, p. 93]; Catherine [2011, pp. 179-190]; and Shonin & Van Gordon [2014, p. 466].

Footnotes (continued)

[13] See the Vimuttimagga: “The meditator should enter a place of solitude and guard his thoughts. He considers the death of beings with mind undistracted thus: "I shall die; I shall enter the realm of death; I shall not escape death" (p. 166). See the Visuddhimagga: “One who wants to develop this should go into solitary retreat and exercise attention wisely in this way: “Death will take place; the life faculty will be interrupted,” or “Death, death”. [...] When some exercise it merely in this way, their hindrances get suppressed, their mindfulness becomes established with death as its object, and the meditation subject reaches access” (p. 226). For further details, see also Sayadaw [2000, p. 93].

[14] See the Vimuttimagga (pp. 166-167), which warns against anxiety, fear, or indifference because they prevent the meditator from attaining wisdom; and the Visuddhimagga (p. 226), which warns against sorrow, anxiety, gladness, or indifference, because they prevent the arising of mindfulness, sense of urgency, and knowledge.

[15] See the Vimuttimagga (pp. 167-170) and the Visuddhimagga (pp. 226-235). A detailed commentary on these eight ways can be found in Conze [1967, pp. 87-104].

[16] The Visuddhumagga quotes the Anguttara Nikaya in relation to the fourth way (6.20) and in relation to the seventh way (6.19).

Footnotes (continued)

[17] On the effects on a meditator's practice, see the Vimuttimagga: "That yogin through these [eight] ways practises mindfulness of death and develops (the perception of) disagreeableness. Owing to facility in (the perception of) disagreeableness and owing to facility in mindfulness, his mind is not disturbed. When his mind is undisturbed, he is able to destroy the hindrances and cause the arising of the meditation (jhana) factors and attain to access-concentration" (p. 170). See also the Visuddhimagga: "So while he does his recollecting by means of one or other of these eight ways, his consciousness acquires [the support of] repetition owing to the reiterated attention, mindfulness settles down with death as its object, the hindrances are suppressed, and the jhána factors make their appearance. But since the object is stated with individual essences, and since it awakens a sense of urgency, the jhána does not reach absorption and is only access" (p. 235). On the notions of hindrances, jhana (factors), access and absorption concentration, see for example Sayadaw [2000].

[18] On the effects of a meditator's knowledge, see the Vimuttimagga: "He who practises mindfulness of death can dwell in the perception of impermanence and the perception of subjection to ill through the thought of the cutting off of life and the destruction of the mind" (p. 170).

[19] On the effects on a meditator's life practice, see the Visuddhimagga: "With mindfulness of death, thinking, "I have got to die," he gives up improper search [...], and with a growing sense of urgency he comes to live without attachment" (p. 93). See also note 4 for more details. On the sense of urgency, especially related to the Buddha's life after becoming aware of aging, illness, and death, see Thera [2001, pp. 57-60].

Footnotes (continued)

[20] The effects on knowledge and life practice are well condensed in the Visuddhimagga: “A bhikkhu [Buddhist monk] devoted to mindfulness of death is constantly diligent. He acquires perception of disenchantment with all kinds of becoming (existence). He conquers attachment to life. He condemns evil. He avoids much storing. He has no stain of avarice about requisites. Perception of impermanence grows in him, following upon which there appear the perceptions of pain and not-self. But while beings who have not developed [mindfulness of] death fall victims to fear, horror and confusion at the time of death as though suddenly seized by wild beasts, spirits, snakes, robbers, or murderers, he dies undeluded and fearless without falling into any such state. And if he does not attain the deathless here and now, he is at least headed for a happy destiny on the breakup of the body” (p. 236).

[21] See Burns [1994].

[22] See Jain [2023].

[23] See Analayo *et al.* [2022].

[24] See Moon [2019, 2020].

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