

MINDFULNESS OF DEATH



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Preface

This book entitled *Mindfulness of Death* has been published for people who have set their mind on practicing the Dhamma. The practice will provide the greatest benefits when practitioners cultivate their mind using mindfulness of death. These people are regarded as heedful in the way they lead their life. For instance, if they wish to make merit they will not delay in making merit. If they wish to maintain the moral precepts, they will not delay their efforts in maintaining the moral precepts. If they wish to meditate, they will not delay putting effort to meditate for peace within themselves. Hence these people will not die without making merit for themselves.

Frequently thinking about mortality is in accordance with the Lord Buddha's teaching. For those who have developed mindfulness of death, upon applying their mind to meditation, their mind will not run away on various trains of thought. Their mind will calm down quickly because of frequent reflection on mortality. Such persons will be able to make a lot of merit, in line with their personal ability. They will then obtain good results and benefits from having been born a human being.

Mindfulness of Death

On this occasion all of us, monks, novices, and devout lay followers, have assembled together in this assembly hall. We intend to seek the way to be freed from suffering and to gain supreme happiness following in the footsteps of our Lord Buddha.

With this goal in mind, we have to put forth earnest effort and perseverance to make merit for ourselves. We should look all around us, left and right, to realise that our lives are slipping by, steadily, day by day. Old age and infirmity are advancing upon us every day and all the times. As long as we do not make effort to meditate to see the real truth, we are deluded by our own apparent youthfulness. However, if we do contemplate this wisely, we will realise that once we are born, we continuously age and change, and will eventually reach the final state of deterioration — death. The wise ones with mindful heart, upon contemplating death, will realise that death is near.

Ones who understand this fact will make earnest efforts to cultivate meritorious virtue for themselves. On the other hand, those who neither develop awareness on mortality — reminding themselves of death on a daily basis, nor realising that death can happen any day, are called heedless people. They indulge in the

pleasures of life, assuming that their life will last for many more days, months and years. As a result, they are negligent and fail to accumulate merit for themselves. Their life will then have been futile. Just like some people who stay at home or elsewhere with children, grandchildren, with brothers and sisters, they have never been to the temple, they never study the Dhamma or listen to Dhamma talks. They never train themselves to correct their bad tendencies. They are deluded and are foolishly blinded. They do not know the right behaviour and the way to practice. They do not appreciate the value of their life. As such, they are just obsessed with seeking pleasures from life. This is what we call being complacent in the various stages of life.

While they are youthful, they mistakenly believe that they are still young. On reaching middle age, they mistakenly believe that they are still strong and do not need to worry about going to the temple yet. When they are 50 or 60 years old, some mistakenly think that they are not old yet. As a result, they do not go to the temple, listen to Dhamma talks, observe the precepts or practice meditation. At the advanced age of 70, 80 or 90 years old, they then claim that their eyes become blurred, they have no strength to walk, and they are too old to go to the temple to listen to Dhamma talks or practice observing the moral precepts. As such, they have wasted their entire life and lost all opportunity to bring

virtue and worth into their life. Thus, they have no refuge. Birth in the next life will not be fruitful.

So for this reason, we should think of bringing the Dhamma into our hearts without using age as an excuse. **During the time of the Lord Buddha, the Lord Buddha taught people not to be complacent in the various stages of life, not to be heedless of age.** Being heedless of age, some do not go to the temple because they think they are still young. They should not think so. Instead, they should have wisdom and an awareness, and be capable of learning the teaching of the Lord Buddha in order to bestow themselves with virtue. These are people who are not heedless in the various stages of their life because they realise that death can happen any day, any time and any minute, and that this applies to everyone in this world. Once we realise that the possibility of death is close at hand, we will not indulge ourselves with worldly joy. Instead, we will be intent on developing virtue and worth in our life. We will consistently engage in meritorious actions; whether by giving alms, conducting wholesome deeds, or maintaining the precepts, bestowing ourselves with morality and righteousness. As for meditation, we will make earnest effort to train, develop, correct and elevate our mind to attain peace and contentment. This is how heedful people are.

Once our mind is peaceful and firmly concentrated, we can contemplate how our body evolves after it is born. **We will then learn that our physical body possesses three universal characteristics of existence; namely, impermanence, suffering, and non-self.** These are the facts that we should be fully aware of and clearly understand. For those who have not yet understood, they should learn and keep this perception in mind. We can see that after we are born, we then grow; from being a young child, we turn teenaged, middle-aged, through to becoming senior and elderly. As such, should we not agree that this is impermanence. We should mindfully contemplate ourselves. From the time we were just a baby, our body continuously changed and evolved to what it is now. What is it? Is it certain? Is it permanent? If we remained small as we used to be, then it would be permanent. If we remained young and did not grow older, then it would be permanent. When we reach middle age, from there we turn senior and elderly. Our skin wrinkles and slackens, our teeth wear away and fall out, our hair whitens and turns gray, and it evolves like this. Even so, some are not wise enough to realise that they have grown old. Some do not realise it even when they have turned 50, 60 or 70. They do not realise this. Why? They have not studied the Dhamma principles proclaimed by the Lord Buddha. They are deluded; they indulge themselves with worldly joy and waste their life completely. We should acknowledge and comprehend this.

Wherever we may be born, birth ordinarily brings suffering along with it. Birth does not bring just happiness and comfort all the time. The suffering caused by diseases and ailments, hot and cold weather, hunger, thirst and tiredness, tramples upon our physical body. At times, we are sad, unhappy, depressed, and we cry. Sorrow, sadness and defilements do exist. Suffering is natural and normal. There is no place in this entire world where you can escape from it. Who on earth can live his life without experiencing bodily or mental suffering? No one.

Even doctors or nurses who prescribe medicine, and pharmacists who earned their pharmacy degree from whichever institution, although they can dispense medicine to cure diseases, they are also under the influence of birth, old age, sickness and death like everybody else. Despite their skills in preparing and formulating all kinds of medicine, they cannot avoid sickness. This shows that our bodily form, once it comes into existence, brings suffering along with it. It does not embody happiness. If we think that it embodies happiness, we are deluded. If anyone should think that the body embodies happiness and comfort, he has been deluded by the body. In fact, once we are born, the true nature of the body is to come to experience suffering.

Now, **anything that brings suffering is non-self**. It is beyond the power of anyone to rule, to protect or to maintain. Is there

anyone among us in this world, whether here or elsewhere, who can truly control or look after himself? Only those who are not mindful and unwise wish to find ways to control others. They may use violence, lethal force, imprisonment, threats and coercion or other means, in the hope to bring others under their own control. Where on earth is that possible? Their wishes will not be fulfilled. Who on earth can force all others to listen to him? That is impossible. Forcing all others not to listen to him is also impossible. Can anyone stand another person on the palm of his hand, flick the person's head and order that person to obey him? Is there anyone in the world who is willing to be kept under such control? We can safely say that there is no such person in this world. However, we wish to think there is. We uselessly bring unhappiness onto ourselves. We all should bear in mind that we cannot order or control even ourselves. Then, why should we think we can order or control others? How can we put others under our control, or claim that they are ours? We should contemplate. We should ponder over this. If we can take this idea to heart, we will be able to let go of others; we will not cling to anyone or anything. Similar to the time when we come together, eventually we will leave and go separate ways. This is what we call unite and part freely; everyone is free to go anywhere at will, no one is bound to anyone else. Now let's think about growing old, isn't it similar? Nobody can stop others from

growing old. Take a look at ourselves. We cannot even control ourselves not to grow old. How could we stubbornly think that we can keep others under our control? Hence, we all should study to understand the Dhamma, the teaching of the Lord Buddha.

The Lord Buddha stated that no one has the power to control the body, these physical aggregates of ours. The body just changes according to its own nature. If we do not believe this, we can look at ourselves. Is there anyone who can order himself to remain a child as he wishes? Can anyone remain young and not grow old as he wishes? When we reach the middle age of 40 or 50, can we stop ourselves from getting older? Our body just gets older. This is its nature. Our skin wrinkles, dries and slackens. Our hair whitens and turns gray. These teeth of ours are uncontrollable and they may fall out of our mouth. We wish the hair on our head not to turn gray but to remain black. It does not stay black; it whitens and turns gray. Does our body listen to us? Our skin was once firm, but it slackens even though we do not want it to. Even though we want our eyes to stay clear and bright, and not turn filmy or blurred, it will. Now consider our ears; we used to hear clearly, once we get old, our sense of hearing is diminished, and the ears may become deaf. We used to have good memory. Now that we grow old, we suffer from memory loss; we become forgetful. Our senses deteriorate. Our body also loses its strength and capability. Is there anyone who

can control and look after his body? How can we insist on taking control over others when we cannot look after even ourselves? We should ponder whether all these things that we normally take to be ours are truly ours? Is this me? Is this mine? Really. We should consider whether we can control them. Is it ultimately within our power to protect and control? When sickness strikes, can we claim that this body is ours and order it not to ache, not to get sick? If it is truly ours, it will not ache, it will not get sick, but it aches and gets sick anyhow. Even after we take all sorts of medicine, it keeps aching, and sickness still prevails. This is what the Lord Buddha teaches us. We should study and practice the Dhamma. Now if we carefully consider, we will see that, in the end, we just age and get old. Various diseases come along, inflicting death on us, sooner or later. If a disease cannot be cured even after receiving treatment by a doctor, or by an injection of medicine, or by surgery, in the end what is it? In the end it is death.

Now the same holds true for old age. It is not a particular disease. When we become very old, we do not wish to die and be parted from our children and grandchildren. We love our children, our grandchildren and our great grandchildren. We love our friends, our children, our grandchildren and our great grandchildren. We love our friends and we love many things, and we feel possessive of them. Even though we do not wish to be parted from those

who are dear to us, we still inevitably die. We will be parted from our friends, our children and our grandchildren. Even if we let our grandchildren hold our hands, or even if we hold the hands of those we love in order not to be parted, death is just inevitable. Why is this body of ours like this? For example, our grandparents passed away and were parted from us. Our parents' generation steadily passes away and leave us. Our friends die off day by day. If you do not believe this, visit any major hospital to see just how many people are dying each day? What diseases do they die of? They die from various diseases or from old age. Is that really preventable? They do not wish to die but how well can they really look after or take care of themselves? Can we have all sorts of people to take care of them and to keep them from dying? When we consider ourselves, we are facing the same fate. Even though we take care of ourselves to stall off death, we will unavoidably die. Since dying is beyond our control, whose body is this? Is it ours, or is it somebody else's? This is what the Lord Buddha teaches. If the body were ours, we would not die. But it is not so since we all eventually die. This body refuses to be ours. However, we feel possessive of it. We feel possessive of our body, so we take all kinds of medicine to keep it going. We look after our body like this all through life. In fact we nurture it only to make merit with it. Every bodily form, whether tall or short, fair or dark, fat or thin, ugly or not beautiful, is all the same.

After birth it is not permanent. It becomes old and, eventually, passes away. This is the pattern of life and death everywhere in the world. It is the same in every country, every city. Hence, the Dhamma exists everywhere in the world. A person with mindfulness and wisdom can therefore meditate anywhere in the world wherever he may go. If he understand the Dhamma, he can observe the nature and meditate everywhere in the world, no matter where he is; at home, on the road, in a car, in a boat or in an airplane, he can meditate, because he is wise, he realises the essence of the Dhamma that a person cannot really control anything. Everything evolves in accordance with its nature. It merely exists in this world. It is just normal.

Therefore while we are still alive, we should earnestly strive to develop virtuous qualities, to enhance ourselves further. Let our store of spiritual might grow by committing meritorious acts so our discontentment is cleared away. This is regarded as removing suffering from our mind, leaving only bliss. If you don't believe the speaker, try considering this; someone who completes a charitable act will feel gratified. This gratification stamps out discontentment. All that remains is the merit in one's heart. Maintaining the moral precepts brings about similar effects. We will be gratified because our heart recognises that we are able

to keep our conducts under the rules of morality. If others don't maintain the moral precepts, it is their business. When one's mind is cultivated, trained to be peaceful, and firmly established in peace, it will be elated. It is not swayed, or easily shaken. It is regarded as feeling proud for having grasped the principles of meditation. If we are wise and mindful, if we look at this world according to the Dhamma and recognise the existence of the three universal characteristics all around us, we will be aware that all things are impermanent, bear suffering and are non-self. Then the mind will be calm, at peace and aware. We will know that these should be the subjects for our reflection. When we understand such things, we will develop and adjust our life accordingly. The time will come when the body ceases living. One should therefore bring up the thoughts of mortality — reminding oneself of death. Upon frequent thoughts of death, one will earnestly seek ways to bestow merit upon oneself. One will endeavour to see things through, and study for the full understanding of the Dhamma. The Lord Buddha's teaching states that we are all born with the responsibility to undertake fruitful tasks. There is a purpose for being born a human. One needs to reflect and question to understand the purpose one was brought to this life.

The Lord Buddha stated that those of us taking a human birth should undertake fruitful tasks. The tasks are for one's own benefit. If the mind is restless, we must train the mind. If we remain unwise, we must strive to practice in order to develop wisdom. For when wisdom is developed, we will then be capable of differentiating right from wrong. We will then recognise sin, and appreciate that it brings suffering. We will recognise merit and appreciate that it brings contentment. This is how a person learns to become wise. If we do not want to live a worthless life, wherever we may be and in whatever posture; whether standing, walking, sitting or lying down, we should be mindful and apply wisdom to contemplate for a true understanding of the reasons for our being, and for all our actions. In fact, everything we do is only for some useful purposes. We should look after our body sufficiently so we can complete the tasks. After birth, this body goes on according to its nature. It needs to be tended to. This is the way this world is. We should live accordingly. To study for the enlightenment that the Lord Buddha has attained, we must clearly understand the ultimate truth. The noble ones have a true understanding of the world and its natural states. They understand that the human realm starts off with all having to experience birth, old age, sickness and death. They fully comprehend how this world exists; from the time before birth, how life proceeds after birth, and how life proceeds upon natural death.

Only when we have a clear understanding will we be freed from suffering. How can we be freed from the suffering of this world if we remain ignorant? For when we are ignorant about things, we will cling to them. We will hold ourselves fast to those things that we do not understand. When we attain the full understanding, we will be capable of staying detached from everybody and everything. When we visit others, we can stay harmoniously with all. At the time to part, each of us simply leaves. One who can live and behave as such is regarded as capable of seeing things as they truly are. Just like water drops on lotus leaves; they stay on the leaves without clinging. Have you ever seen a big lotus leaf and noticed how water drops stay there? Do they adhere to the leaf? If we tilt the leaf, the drops of water run off straight away. They do not stick to the leaf. Similar to those noble individuals who already accomplished mindfulness and wisdom, such as all noble monks they do not feel attached to anyone in this world. They are regarded as liberated from suffering. Those who clearly understand the ultimate truth do not feel attached to anyone because they thoroughly understand the truth as it is. They stay unattached, not clinging nor grasping — not even to themselves. Unlike those noble individuals, we have not yet developed wisdom. We are still unwise, unenlightened. We do not yet clearly see and know the world. We cling to one another, feel attached, and are caught in the cycle

of rebirth. For us, being caught in the world is still normal. For devout laypersons, I would like you to graciously reflect upon yourselves. It is worth contemplating those whom we think are our loved ones; our husbands, wives, children and relatives. Whose are they, indeed? Are they truly ours? Or are they not? Even our body, is it truly ours? Or is it not? As you repeatedly ponder over this, while keep reflecting on death, you will realise that the moment will come when death separates you from your loved ones. When you die and leave them, what can be your refuge? Directly on this point, upon meditation each day, we ought to contemplate what can be our refuge. If we do not practice to develop loving kindness, train ourself and cultivate our mind to develop wisdom, what will be our refuge? Can we rely on our material possessions? We cannot bring them along with us. Or do we rely on others? How can we rely on them? Upon death, the mind-consciousness goes to a new state of existence. What we bring with us is our past virtue. Those who accumulate merit will be led by their virtue. Those who do evil deeds will be led by their sin. These are the principles of the journey that takes us to the new state of existence. **When we are aware and wise, when our mind is agile, when we clearly comprehend like the noble ones, to the extent that we no longer cling to this worldly existence, we will then behave like water drops on a lotus leaf. We live in this world without clinging to it. We live with the various forms of aggregates without clinging to them.**

On this very point, we all should examine to understand how to live in the world without being at odds with it; that is to thoroughly understand it. Why not live in accordance with the true nature of this world while our body resides in it? Heat, cold, hunger, and thirst naturally exist in this world. Birth, old age, sickness and death happen everyday in this world. Our body is similar to the world. Hence we ought to study to understand that this world is full of impermanence. That is, we must learn about the true nature of the world from this body and understand it as it is. If we do not understand it, we cannot possibly be freed from this world. Because of this, for all that matter, when we do not fully comprehend, we will not be able to let go of anything and remain captured. We will feel attached; as a result, we remain ignorant and we will always be in doubt. When we are no longer doubtful, we will appreciate that everything in this world follows the three universal characteristics of being; that they are impermanent, that they bear suffering, and that they are, in reality, not owned by anyone. They simply exist in the world, like those houses, cars, or boats that we have. They remain in this world and are left here after we die, aren't they? Can monks or novices bring along with them exquisite shrines, assembly halls, shelters, requisites, alms, bowl, robes and other things after they die? No they cannot. It is so. Can monks, young or old alike, bring their remains with them when they leave this world, even if they want to? Can they? Nobody can. Since nobody can, this is therefore

an absolute truth. They can't bring their belongings along. They cherish their bodies before they die, they take good care of their bodies, but their bodies still stubbornly disintegrate.

If we recognise this truth, then we should make it clear in our mind that the only reason we keep things in our home is to use them to satisfy our body. We collect things just for our body. Everything is for pampering our body. All the suffering in this world that we bear, they all end up on this body. If we cannot let go of our body, we will not be freed from our sufferings. When will we attain this ultimate understanding? Therefore, this body is the world that we must study and thoroughly understand, so that we can let go; we will not excessively cling to it to the point that it becomes an attachment. This is what we need to be steadily aware of. If you still aren't aware of this fact then stroke your arms and your legs, and frequently ponder over yourself to determine to whom this body really belongs. We must contemplate it until we understand it, so the truth and the Dhamma can arise in our heart. Knowing these will bring us contentment. If you ask the noble monks who have learned the Dhamma, whether they are at ease and contented at heart, they will say that they are, though they may be very old and infirm to the point that they cannot walk. None of them says otherwise. These accomplished meditators say that they are contented. What

are they contented with? Their body grows old and deteriorates to the point that they cannot stand up by themselves, but they still say that they are contented. They smile because they are contented in their heart, because they understand their physical aggregate with ultimate clarity. And because they know the nature of their body, they know the nature of the whole world. They do not cling, just like water drops that stay on a lotus leaf without sticking to it. They live in the world but do not feel attached to it. When they see monks and novices, they simply teach and advise. If their advice is not listened to, they just let it be. They are not concerned. We should study the Dhamma to understand this. If we study the Dhamma, when we stay together, we will understand that the gathering is simply a collaboration of physical bodies to make merit together. The time will come when death is finally upon us. We may order the group not to break up, but it will. We don't want the group to separate, but it does. Everybody goes away in different directions. This is the ultimate truth that we must contemplate to see with ultimate clarity that the three universal characteristics of existence are within our body, and our body will, eventually and unavoidably, reach the final state of deterioration — death.

Therefore, I want to advise you all, monks, novices, as well as devotees, to reflect on mortality every day; a hundred times,

three hundred times, five hundred times. When we keep pondering over it, we will become earnest in the tasks. We will not be negligent in accumulating merit and goodness. Hurry up. Our life is so fleetingly short. It is not long. Take a good look, as days flash by, what have we been doing? As days and nights pass by, what have we been doing? We should question what we have done to improve ourselves. Are our deeds evil or virtuous? What-do our deeds earn us today? Did we do any good deeds that brought us contentment, or did we accumulate only defilement and disquiet? We should recognise that if defilement and disquiet exist, then we have a deficit today. We should develop our mind to be joyful, so that we can be contented with our merit and goodness. Then we will attain our own refuge.

Hence, everyone, as we take the Rains Retreat here, we should resolve to develop virtuous qualities. For devout laypersons, the Rains Retreat has started, we should make an effort to go to the temple and listen to Dhamma talk every Buddhist holy day and a day before. If you couldn't go but stay at home, please try to meditate and do good deeds. Don't be over confident, don't be negligent and waste your time. When we are determined to do good deeds and to be heedful, we will bestow goodness on ourselves. The happiness born out of all these belongs to us, not

others. When the feeling of happiness arises, while we are mindful of it, we will feel naturally at ease. Like those respected elderly monks, they are at ease. Their mind are contented and freed. Now, only their body exists in this world, but they aren't attached to it. They live with their physical body or physical aggregate but do not cling to it.

So the Dhamma talk on the topic of reflection on death, which reminds you to be heedful, and on the topic of the three universal characteristics, should give you a reasonably clear understanding. It is time to end.