

Satipaṭṭhāna (32) Death That Highlights Life

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

body, corpse, contemplation, contemplate, sixth exercise, Four Foundations for Awareness, *sati*, sensations, decay, decompose, charnel ground, wild animals, worms, Himalayas, Buddhadāsa, Thailand, skin, hair, muscles, tendons, bones, dust, *Dhammapada*, vigilant, vigilance, absence, photographs, alive, die

Gil Fronsdal

The contemplation of the corpse is the sixth of 13 exercises that make up the practice of the Four Foundations for Awareness. This exercise sits between mindfulness of sensations and mindfulness of feelings.

We are preparing the ground to go deeper in the practice of *sati*, in becoming sensitive and aware of the sensate life – the sensations that come and go. These sensations have characteristic qualities of being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. The ability to feel the

pleasure and pain of things is part of our deeper, animated life.

In some ways, we can think of pleasure and pain as much deeper and more within us. It is not only physical when we feel the sun's warmth on our skin. There is the purely physical sensation of it. The pleasure we get from that is a mixture of physical pleasure and mental pleasure – the mental evaluation of it. Pleasure is something deeper and more connected to our lived life.

Between mindfulness of sensations and mindfulness of feelings, there is the contemplation of a human body that has neither sensations nor feelings. To spend time contemplating that such a day will come for each of us. In the contemplation of the corpse, there are nine states of decay. The practice is to imagine for each one of those, “I will be like this too.” All the things of the body that we cherish, love, identify with, are attached to or preoccupied with – they will all slowly go.

The contemplation of the corpse involves what happened to corpses in the old days when many people did not cremate their bodies. They were put out in a charnel ground, where there were wild animals, and left to rot, decay, and decompose. People could go to a charnel ground and see that process. A friend of mine was in the Himalayas, where they still have charnel

grounds. Walking through a charnel ground, he came across a recently dead body that was just left there.

I mentioned yesterday the teacher Buddhādāsa, who had the skeleton hanging of Miss Thailand 1936. His instruction for when he died was to simply put his body in the forest – a place where his followers, monks, and nuns could go and contemplate it decaying. He did not get his wish because he was one of the most famous monks in Thailand. Other authorities had their own ideas.

Our skin and hair, which we pay a lot of attention to, will all decay and pass away. They may be eaten by worms, mushrooms, and fungi. The muscles that some of us exercise will fade and decay. They will not be here at some point. The tendons will no longer be here. The bones will no longer be held together. They will begin to decay and eventually become dust.

This exercise is to know that not only will the sensations go but also all the ways in which we attach or orient ourselves around the body. This absence highlights that we are alive. Some of the core elements of that aliveness are the sensations and feelings. Maybe we appreciate these sensations more deeply by contemplating their absence through the image of a corpse – that we will be like a corpse too. It may be a

way of taking this moment more seriously. The only place that you can be alive is in the present moment.

There is a very powerful verse in the *Dhammapada*. In chapter two, the first verse says something like:

Negligence is the path to death. Vigilance, path to the deathless. Those who are negligent are as if already dead. Those who are vigilant never die.

I do not know the figurative meaning of “never die.” The sense of being vigilant, heedful, careful, present in a full way – the only place where that can happen is now, in the present moment. To feel and be present for the flow of sensations, experience, and feelings – and to let go of everything else. When you die, you are a corpse. You will have let go of everything.

It is possible to do this before you die, and why not? Why not, when that gives us freedom? Why not, when that gives us the experience of really being alive and present – free in a way that is fantastic and wonderful?

You might not have a place, like an anatomy lab, to spend time contemplating a corpse. But, it is probably pretty easy to find some photographs – photographs of people who are peacefully dead, maybe photographs of decaying bodies. This is not meant to be gruesome or to upset your stomach. Rather, is there a way of contemplating a corpse – a body with no animated sensations – that brings you into the present moment?

I will tell you a story of something I do. I have told the story many times, but it relates to this topic. I am fond of looking at old photographs, old enough that the people in them are no longer alive, like from 100 to 140 years ago. I like it when the photographs have really good resolution and you can see people's faces. I will go up close to these portraits of people and look at the eyes or the facial expression.

Occasionally, you see in these photographs a gleam in the eyes, a spark of life that was there for that moment. Other times you see an expression on their faces that stands out as the expression of the moment. When I see these, I contemplate, "This was *their* moment to be alive, and this is *my* moment for me to be alive." Somehow appreciating that that was their moment, I do not want to miss my moment. This is my moment, my glimmer of the spark of life. Life is short. Looking at old photographs puts me into my own life in a fuller, nicer way.

I think that is what I will say today. I am not sure what we will do tomorrow. I would like to do one more day on the corpse contemplation. I have not introduced the full text of it. But we may move on to mindfulness of feelings.

Thank you.