

Satipaṭṭhāna (33) Corpse Contemplation

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

sixth exercise, body, dying, death, mindfulness, awareness, attachments, concentration, dissolving, dissolution, arising, passing

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Today's topic is contemplation of the corpse. In Theravadan Buddhism, the Four Foundations for Awareness is understood to be one of the best practices at the time of dying. It is the practice most conducive to liberation, and dying is one of the best times – better late than never – to become free.

Sometimes the text of this sutta is read at the bedside of a dying person. Even if it is read in Pali and not necessarily understood by the dying person, it is thought to be beneficial. It can also be read after a person dies. So this text has a deep connection to death and dying, and at the center of it is contemplation of the corpse.

I offered a brief guided meditation with this as a reference point. I do not know if I set it up well enough in the short amount of time we had, but I would love to see some comments in the YouTube chat box. I would like to know what it was like for you, if you were able to follow along with the dissolution of the body meditation, and what you may have learned from it or what benefit may have come from it.

I will now read some of your comments. “Daunting.” “Freeing.” “Got a sense of no-self.” “Very powerful.” “Got to the point of the big question, ‘Who am I?’” “Made me smile.” “Love preparing for my death.” “We are not the body.” “I noticed the dissolving of attachment.” “Very beneficial, but do it again.” “Very powerful.” “Tangible perspective.” “The process helped with reducing fear of death.” “Calming.” “I pictured myself decaying in a field of flowers.” “Felt like a deep knowing of our mortality.” “The rising of deep compassion.” “I thought I’d be afraid but ended up in a puddle.” “Beautiful.” “Onward leading.” “First revisiting then very peaceful.” “An insight into true reality.” “Very spacious.” “Hard to come back into my thinking mind.” “I felt like I was in outer space.” “Reassuring.” “Connection to nature and the universe is powerful and comforting.” “Body is not myself.” “Connected.” “Was very light, nonattached, free.” “Powerful.” “Helpful.” “New and different.” “Dissolving into space.” “Was able to follow.” “Peaceful.” “I want to go back and listen to the whole series – thank you.”

“Will have a green burial.” “Just following breath, pouring in teaching, but I was not so ready to take this to my heart.” “I wasn’t into it.” “My body was blown into the wind; identification with the self disappeared.” “Really good work.” “The sense of increasing space awareness was quite profound.” “Each layer became more and more spacious.” “Very calm.” “Body is just a vessel.” “Experience of emptiness.” “Relieving.”

Great. Thank you for these comments. I know that this contemplation may not have necessarily resonated with everyone. For those who may have found it not so peaceful or nice, hopefully you can put aside this part of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. We will leave it behind as we move to the second foundation, mindfulness of feeling tones, next week. The second foundation for awareness is often considered the pivotal part of the *Satipaṭṭhāna*. I will talk about how structurally, and in different ways, it is pivotal to a huge transition that happens in the practice as we go from the body to the mind.

Many Western Dharma teachers talk about mindfulness of death as a way of cherishing life – appreciating that we are alive, enjoying life, and being more fully with it. That is certainly a wonderful thing to do. But I think the tradition focuses on mindfulness of death more in terms of the way it helps us to let go of attachment – attachment to self, to the body, and particularly to concepts and ideas. All attachments will keep us from

sinking deeply into the *Satipaṭṭhāna* – into this awareness practice that we are cultivating and developing.

Some people find that the *Satipaṭṭhāna* contemplation of the corpse is a very engaging visualization practice. Some people who visualize well find that they get very concentrated by doing it. The contemplation has nine parts, and the repetition of these parts can be conducive to concentration, a main support for awareness practice.

When the mind becomes concentrated enough, we can do the refrain. We do not have to worry about the mind wandering off; we can just settle back and observe our experience in a deep way. At this point, we let go of the corpse meditation. When we settle back into this deep concentrated state, we begin to observe the arising and disappearing – the arising and dissolving of sensations, experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

This contemplation of the corpse prepares the ground for this awareness. Sometimes it can be disorienting for people to see everything dissolving and then appearing, dissolving and disappearing. This can happen when the mind is very still and quiet and not organized around ideas, concepts, and attachments. The corpse meditation also prepares the ground for the deeper dimensions of the refrain, the deeper dimensions of the practice as it opens up. It makes it easier – more

comforting or easy to go through – when everything just appears to be arising and passing, arising and dissolving.

Satipaṭṭhāna helps us to appreciate this life – to live in the lived experience. The only place we can know we are alive is here and now. We come to appreciate the manifestation of this life in the sensations of our body, our thoughts, and our feelings so that we can really show up for this life and be present for it. Don't miss it by being in thoughts and ideas and by being too busy. We begin being present in such a way that we feel more acutely. We feel with greater sensitivity the arising and passing of things, which helps us to let go of the attachments we have.

As we let go of more and more attachments, *Satipaṭṭhāna* becomes better and better. It becomes richer and more wonderful. Occasionally, it will be a little frightening. The corpse meditation prepares the ground that it is okay to let go. It is safe to let go. We can let go of everything.

Thank you. Thank you for the comments that you wrote. I was not able to read all of them – they came so fast. But we are finished now. I will go and read them all and see what you said.

Given that what we did today was contemplation of the corpse and dying, maybe you should be a little bit careful with yourself for the next hour or two or the day. This can be very tender and touching, sometimes challenging, and even disturbing. So care for yourself and err on the side of being slow, calm, loving, and caring. Do some nice things for yourself. Walk around the block and get a little bit more grounded if you need to.

If you feel spacious and wonderful, stay close to it. Stay close to the spaciousness and peace. One of the great things to do when you are peaceful is to practice. Live your life at the speed of peace – meaning as you do things, go at the speed of whatever you are doing so that you do not dissipate the peace. Stay close to it. Thank you all.