Aging with Compassion and Wisdom - Session 4 10-26-2026

This third messenger may be the most challenging so far. Fear of death underlies our other fears on aging and illness. Contemplating death can seem grim or morbid, but many people have found that it can be liberating to deeply live with the awareness of these divine messengers of aging, sickness, and death. The third messenger differs from the first two, because, while we are all aging and have all had illnesses or injuries, we have not yet experienced death. We don't really know what to expect. That "don't-know mind" is actually an aid. It keeps us open. Larry said in Living in the Light of Death that Rodney Smith, another Dharma teacher who has worked in hospice, once remarked that the people who had the most difficult transitions in the dying process were those who were *expecting* a particular spiritual experience as they were dying. In truth, we will be alone when we reach that part of our path, and all we can bring with us is whatever we have developed and practiced up to that point.

Home Practice:

Sit in meditation every day for 20-40 minutes

At the end of your formal meditation practice, say or chant, and then reflect on any version of the Five Remembrances.

Throughout the week, spend some time with any of these reflections or practices. You do not need to do them all.

Reflection:

Nine contemplations of Atisha, an Indian sage, who lived about 1500 years after the Buddha.

1. Everyone must die
2. The remainder of our lifespan is decreasing continually
3. Death will come regardless of whether we have made time to practice the dharma
4. The length of life is uncertain
5. There are many causes of death
6. The human body is very fragile
7. Our wealth cannot help us
8. Our loved ones cannot help
9. Our own bodies cannot help

Obituary Practice

Reading an obituary can be a way to honor and appreciate a life. *This* short practice, however, is different. Every now and then, read a page of obituaries in this way: Instead of reading each obituary in detail, go through the page and count how many people died when they were younger than you. How many people were your same age? How many people were older than you? You can also do this as a cemetery practice.

Corpse Contemplation

Imagine a body in one or more states of decay. The classic instructions for this can be found in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta. We also practiced an informal version in our time together, imagining what happens to your body over time after falling off a cliff. To practice the classic instructions, after developing some calming practice in meditation, continue with corpse contemplation while remaining in the meditation posture. You can also do a related version of this practice in daily life, off the cushion, for example, when you come across a dead animal on the road. Pause, and really take in the reality of what happened to this animal. You may find this traditional phrase helpful in any corpse contemplation:

"Truly my body is the same nature as the body being (seen or visualized). It won't go beyond this nature. It is of the same lawfulness."

The Fourth Remembrance

The fourth remembrance runs through all the others.

"I will grow different, separated from all that is dear and appealing to me"

Practicing with the Fourth Reflection

While this is true for us all, and we will all have stories from our own families, the stories of celebrities or public figures who have faced sudden or gradual diminishment and separation from what they loved – whether from age or illness -are easily available and can be inspiring. They also illustrate that neither wealth nor fame can shield a person from the dharma truth expressed in these remembrances. You might practice by searching for the stories of some of these people. Dame Judi Dench, Keith Jarrett, Linda Ronstadt, Celine

Establishing of Mindfulness Discourse Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (DN 22)
https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/DN/DN22.html

from Thānissaro Bhikkhu

Excerpted from the first foundation of mindfulness of the body…

"And further, as if he were to see a corpse cast away in a charnel ground—one day, two days, three days dead—bloated, livid, & festering, he applies it to this very body, 'This body, too: Such is its nature, such is its future, such its unavoidable fate.'

"In this way he remains focused internally on the body in & of itself, or externally on the body in & of itself, or both internally & externally on the body in & of itself. Or he remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to the body, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to the body, or on the phenomenon of origination & passing away with regard to the body. Or his mindfulness that 'There is a body' is maintained to the extent of knowledge & remembrance. And he remains independent, unsustained by [not clinging to] anything in the world. This is how a monk remains focused on the body in & of itself.

"Or again, as if he were to see a corpse cast away in a charnel ground, being chewed by crows, being chewed by vultures, being chewed by hawks, being chewed by dogs, being chewed by hyenas, being chewed by various other creatures… a skeleton smeared with flesh & blood, connected with tendons… a fleshless skeleton smeared with blood, connected with tendons… a skeleton without flesh or blood, connected with tendons… bones detached from their tendons, scattered in all directions—here a hand bone, there a foot bone, here a shin bone, there a thigh bone, here a hip bone, there a back bone, here a rib, there a chest bone, here a shoulder bone, there a neck bone, here a jaw bone, there a tooth, here a skull… the bones whitened, somewhat like the color of shells… the bones piled up, more than a year old… the bones decomposed into a powder: He applies it to this very body, 'This body, too: Such is its nature, such is its future, such its unavoidable fate.'