Chapter 9. Mindfulness of Death

The span of a human lifetime is short and constant change is the norm. Time passes swiftly and inexorably, relentlessly marching towards its ultimate conclusion. This human existence can be likened to a fleeting moment, much like a brief burst of lightning or water cascading down a steep incline, incapable of being halted.

This compels us to recognise the urgency of engaging in meaningful practice during our time on this earth. This practice cannot be deferred for some future date; rather, it necessitates an immediate commencement. This is the central theme we have been exploring thus far. We now delve deeper.

b. The actual way to take full advantage of a life with leisure and endowments

This b. matches the a. in Chapter 8 — 'Producing certainty about the general presentation of the Path'.

There are three subtopics for the actual methods of practice:

1) Training the mind in the stages of the path shared with persons of small spiritual scope (chapters 9–12 of this volume and chapters 1–4 of volume 2 of this series)
2) Training the mind in the stages of the path shared with persons of intermediate spiritual scope (volume 2 of this series)
3) Training the mind in the stages of the path for persons of great spiritual scope (volumes 3–5 of this series)

1) Training the mind in the stages of the path shared with persons of Small Scope

a) The Actual Training to Develop the Attitude of the Person of Small Spiritual Scope

There are two subtopics in this section:

i) Developing an attitude of concern for future lives (chapters 9–10 of this volume)
ii) Relying on the means to achieve happiness in future lives (chapters 11–12 of this volume and chapters 1–3 of volume 2)

Developing a concern for future lives is a fundamental practise for individuals with a **small spiritual scope**. This practice involves shifting attention away from the transient concerns of the current life and directing it instead to the implications of death and the nature of the subsequent rebirths. Understanding the processes that shape our experiences is motivating force to secure more favourable future existences.

A pivotal aspect of this practice involves examining actions that can be taken now to ensure a high or higher rebirth in the next life. This includes identifying the causes leading to a superior rebirth and learning how to avoid falling into the lower realms. Pursuit of this knowledge and its practical application forms the core of this path.

Approaching these topics should be deliberate and comprehensive, with a dedication to spending as much time as necessary on each aspect until the prescribed mindset is firmly established. This methodical and reflective practice guides the practitioner in the right direction.

The practitioner's focus should gradually shift away from pursuing transient pleasures in their current life, such as enjoyment, fame, wealth and praise. Instead, they should view this life as fleeting and a product of past karma, which serves as a powerful tool for future benefit. The emphasis transitions towards a long-term perspective, aiming to improve future incarnations. In daily activities, this broader outlook should become increasingly prominent, with less emphasis on present, fleeting concerns. The natural and consistent adoption of this perspective signifies the attainment of the essential attitude for a person with a Small Spiritual scope.

i) Developing an Attitude of Concern for Future Lives

Again two subdivisions:

a' Recollecting death: the awareness that this life will not endure for long (chapter 9)

b' Contemplating what will occur in your future life: the happiness or suffering of the two types of being (chapter 10)

To develop the aspiration to improve one's future lives, it is essential to contemplate the transitory nature of one's current existence. Reflecting on the impermanence of this life raises fundamental questions: "What happens after death? What lies beyond this life?" These inquiries form the foundation for meditation on the causes that determine future circumstances.

The continuity of life is governed by the principle of karma. The nature of each successive life, whether one of happiness or suffering, is mainly influenced by the karma accumulated in previous lives. Virtuous actions typically lead to more favourable outcomes, while non-virtuous actions tend to result in less desirable consequences. These karma principles, together with the impermanence of life, form the core teachings for people with Small Spiritual Scope.

Understanding and internalising these concepts is paramount. It entails recognising the fleeting nature of this life and understanding that actions in your present life carry significant implications for future existences. By meditation on these truths and aligning actions accordingly, individuals shift their focus from transient present pleasures and concerns towards the importance of the quality of their future lives. This shift in focus and the accompanying practices form the core of the spiritual journey for those aiming to secure a more auspicious future existence.

a' Recollecting Death: the Awareness that this Life will not Endure for Long
(a' takes all the rest of this chapter. b' is chapter 10.)

In this topic there are four subtopics:
1' The faults of not cultivating mindfulness of death
2' The benefits of cultivating mindfulness of death
3' The kind of mindfulness of death you should develop
4' How to cultivate mindfulness of death

1' The faults of not cultivating mindfulness of death

Living as if your life will not end presents a significant drawback. In Buddhism, this perspective arises from four common misconceptions: viewing the impermanent as permanent, suffering as pleasure, the impure as pure and the selfless as having an inherent self. These misperceptions lead to actions based on incorrect views, causing us to misuse our lives. The lamrim teaches that each of these wrong views has a specific antidote.

Regarding the impermanent as permanent is particularly damaging to Dharma practice. This misperception leads to a focus on achieving short-term goals, with all efforts geared towards this life's achievements. Such an attitude neglects the importance of death, allowing harmful attitudes and actions to infiltrate one's practice.

Impermanence is of two types: subtle, which is continuous, unnoticed change; and gross, more apparent changes that we often fail to recognise, such as our own mortality. We inherently feel as though we will always exist, which influences our actions and plans, focusing them on achieving happiness in this life. This deception leads to a preoccupation with the '**eight worldly concerns**': attachment to gain, pleasure, praise and fame and aversion to loss, pain, scorn and disgrace. Most actions are driven by these concerns, striving for fleeting goals.

True Dharma practice transcends activities aimed at temporary gains or pleasures, such as acquiring knowledge merely for its own sake or routine meditation without deeper intent. Genuine Dharma practice is distinguished by its goal-oriented nature, aiming for achievements beyond this life—such as a good rebirth, emancipation enlightenment, assisting other beings—rather than being driven by pride or the pursuit of temporary pleasure, which renders activities ordinary and devoid of spiritual value.

If one's concerns are focused exclusively on the pleasures and problems of this life, there is no room or interest in these greater goals and no motivation for Dharma practice. Living as though you will never face death means no preparations for the journey that follows. Dharma practice is precisely this preparation for future lives—with its constant awareness of death and the certainty of life after death.

Practitioners consider what will be most beneficial for their future lives, understanding that those lives depends on the karma of this and previous lives. is essential. True Dharma practice begins with recognition of the opportunity presented by human life to prepare for a better rebirth (and avoid a negative one) and actively works towards this aim. Without the remembrance of death, the impetus for Dharma practice will likely never arise.

We need a constant contemplation of death and a firm understanding of life's impermanence rather than a misdirected focus on living solely in the present; else there is a diluted effort in Dharma practice. Mixed motives leads to wasteful Dharma practice and make it difficult to achieve the primary goal of benefiting future lives.

Failing to acknowledge your impending death breeds laziness and procrastination. An attitude of "I can do it tomorrow or later," means vital time for spiritual practice is squandered. This mindset also fosters strong attachment to worldly pursuits—pleasure, wealth, fame and honour—anchoring the heart in selfishness and can evolve into destructive desires to eliminate any perceived obstacles to personal gratification. This in turn can lead to feelings of anger or jealousy towards others, sparking a cascade of negative consequences. These mental afflictions can propel one into committing harmful actions, including the ten negative actions of body, speech and mind[10], as well as other detrimental deeds. These lead to very bad karma and very poor future lives.

Failure to recognise the faults in pursuing worldly goals and being unaware of the drawbacks of such pursuits mean mental afflictions will inundate the mind incessantly. The teachings of the Dharma are the antidote to these afflictions, offering relief from various forms of pain and suffering. Rejecting these teachings closes off the path to higher rebirths, liberation and enlightenment. Instead, one is steered by negative karma towards unfavourable rebirths and a distressing fate. A very bad rebirth is often the result of inadequate preparation after not acknowledging your own impermanence.

Everything must be left behind.
But by not realising this
I have performed all kinds of evil
For the sake of friends and enemies.

At death, you may confront memories of negative actions driven by self-attachment. These actions often aim to counter threats to your life, reputation, wealth, friends and possessions, stemming from a desire to protect and enhance the self. However, at death, everything you've strived for must be abandoned – relationships, possessions, even your body. You proceed to the next life alone. The shortsightedness of solely focusing on this temporary life becomes evident as life ends, but it's too late to change course.

Cultivating awareness of life's impermanence is crucial. Acknowledging death's inevitability brings numerous benefits. The teachings guide you in contemplating death and preparing for future lives. Learn these practices thoroughly and meditate on them daily. Your mind gradually adapts to this new perspective. This shift in perception leads to behaviour changes, transforming your mindset from death denial ("I am not going to die") to acceptance ("I am going to die"), with profound benefits.

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[10] The "ten negative actions of body, speech and mind" (also ten non-virtuous actions) are a set of ethical guidelines that highlight actions considered harmful and detrimental to one's spiritual and moral development. (They are fully covered in Chapter 14 part 2")

Negative Actions of Body:

1. **Killing (taking life)**: This refers to intentionally causing harm or death to any sentient being, including humans, animals, or insects.
2. **Stealing (taking what is not given)**: This involves the act of taking someone else's property without their consent or stealing in any form.
3. **Sexual misconduct**: Engaging in sexual activities that harm others or violate ethical norms, such as adultery or sexual exploitation.

Negative Actions of Speech:

1. **Lying (false speech)**: Deliberately speaking falsehoods or spreading misinformation with the intent to deceive others.
2. **Divisive speech (sowing discord)**: Creating conflicts or divisions among individuals or groups through harmful speech.
3. **Harsh speech (hurtful speech)**: Speaking in a way that is harsh, hurtful, or disrespectful to others, including using offensive language.
4. **Idle gossip (frivolous speech)**: Engaging in meaningless or idle talk that serves no constructive purpose and may harm others or spread rumours.

Negative Actions of Mind:

1. **Covetousness (greed):** Experiencing excessive desire or attachment for material possessions, wealth, or the belongings of others.
2. **Ill-will (hatred)**: Feeling anger, hatred, or hostility towards others and harbouring harmful intentions.
3. **Wrong views**: Holding distorted or erroneous beliefs that go against Buddhist teachings, such as denying the law of karma, rebirth, or the Four Noble Truths.

These ten negative actions are seen as obstacles to spiritual progress and can lead to negative consequences, both in this life and in future rebirths. Buddhist ethics emphasise refraining from these actions and cultivating their positive counterparts, non-harming, honesty, loving-kindness and wisdom.

2' The benefits of Cultivating Mindfulness of Death

The correct approach to recalling death is a constant awareness of life's impermanence; death can happen at any moment. One cannot find any reason why death couldn't happen in the next moment. Health, youth, friends, or possessions offer no guarantees. Recognising death's uncertainty prompts immediate action. The wise choice is to start preparing now. When this thought always arises, whether working, studying, listening, or meditating, your focus will be on benefiting future rebirths. Every moment will be filled with this motivation, keeping you ready for death.

Since you can't take anything with you when you go, pursuing wealth, fame, or worldly concerns (gain and loss, pleasure and pain, praise and scorn, fame and disgrace) is meaningless. None of these can help. Seeing all worldly goals as hollow, your strong ambition for usual attachments turns toward seeking the highest religious objectives. Determination shifts to virtuous actions for your future benefit. By constantly remembering death, your commitment to Dharma study remains steady, accumulating virtuous karma in your current life.

Impermanence awareness reveals the body's potential, devoid of inherent essence. Breaking it into parts - bones, muscles, blood, excretions - uncovers no essence. Yet, it can be used for this life's essence, ascending to freedom, guiding others, caught in samsara just like yourself, onto the path. What greater goal exists? Benefits arise from recalling death's proximity, praised in sutras and śāstras. The Buddha said:

> Among all plowings of the fields, the autumn turning is the greatest.
> Among all footprints, the elephant's is the greatest.
> Among all ideas, impermanence and death are the greatest,
> Because they eliminate all desire, ignorance and pride of the three worlds.

The perception of impermanence, encompassing everything, including your life, is the supreme understanding, leaving a profound impression in your mind. It's the best tool to have you initiate Dharma practice, clears away ignorance about future lives and desire for the three realms[11]. Additionally, pride is eliminated when you realise your life lacks stability and is soon to end.

This practice is also praised for its immense power. Like a hammer, it shatters the basis of worldly activities and eradicates attachment to this life. All harmful actions of body, speech and mind come from mental afflictions—hatred, jealousy, pride, etc. These afflictions emerge due to a belief in the self, the desire to safeguard this life and resistance to any disruption of happiness. An awareness of impermanence prevents the rise of mental afflictions.

Dharma practice encourages contemplation of long-term goals: a higher rebirth, emancipation and ultimate enlightenment. It fosters the spontaneous practice of virtuous actions. The Buddha emphasised that a firm realisation of death and impermanence marks the commencement of profound transformation.

View your body as a clay pot filled with shit – a valuable meditation topic. Likewise, all things resemble mirages: they appear attractive and substantial, but they are just illusions. We encounter concealed dangers disguised as life's alluring attractions: bodies, wealth, fame and worldly pleasures, all of which can harm you. Your defence lies in recognising life's impermanence, the illusory nature of phenomena and the body is full of shit. Death is shaped by karma and mental afflictions.

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[11] In Buddhism, the "Three Realms" refer to the three broad categories or realms of existence in which sentient beings can be reborn:

- **Desire Realm**: This realm is characterised by desires, cravings and sensual pleasures. Beings in this realm are driven by their desires and attachments. It includes various forms of existence, from the heavenly realms to the lower realms of existence such as the human realm, animal realm and various hell realms.
- **Form Realm**: This realm is inhabited by beings who have attained higher levels of concentration and meditation. Beings in this realm experience refined levels of existence and possess subtle forms. It includes various levels of heavenly realms where beings experience blissful states of existence.
- **Formless Realm**: This realm is beyond physical form and materiality. Beings in this realm have transcended even subtle forms and dwell in states of formlessness or pure consciousness. It consists of realms such as the realms of infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness and neither perception nor non-perception.

The Three Realms are central to Buddhist cosmology and are used to explain the various states of existence that sentient beings can be reborn into based on their karma and level of spiritual development. The ultimate goal in Buddhism is to transcend the cycle of birth and death (samsara) in all three realms and attain liberation (nirvana).

Most people lack the chance to study Dharma or study without effort. The root of this issue lies in neglecting death. We prioritise preparing to live instead of preparing to die. Clinging to living is the doorway to misfortune; it is the entrance to all faults. The antidote is awareness of death, the gateway to all that is virtuous and wonderful.

Regularly meditate on death with firm resolve. Keep impermanence and death in mind as an inner guide, steering you away from harmful actions and towards virtues ones. It will drive you towards practice. This meditation is crucial at every stage of the path.

3' The Kind of Mindfulness of Death You Should Develop

What awareness and meditation are needed? You can't prevent death or take anything with you. Focus on the life you'll be reborn into – human or low. Once down, it's hard to get back up again, more likely to keep worsening. Right now, you have the ability to secure your future. You should fear that death might come before your created causes for a higher rebirth and worry about stopping lower rebirth causes.

The lamrim method advises intensive daily meditation on impermanence to use pure actions and stop lower rebirth causes. By accumulating merit, you can create special karma to sustain practice in your next life, your practice improving with each subsequent life. Ensure at least a high rebirth to continue Dharma practice; without it, this life is wasted. This fear is a constant friend, pushing your preparation for death.

For fear of death to benefit, it must arise well before, not at the last minute. Dharma practitioners, always mindful and prepared for death, have no fear of it

Karma is very precise. Suffering from negative thoughts and actions can be seen as retribution after death. Death isn't a being who punishes; it's within us—no external judge. We do this to ourselves. Avoid non-virtuous karma, accumulate virtuous karma and fear of death fades. Constant recognition of death is your true friend.

Contemplating life's impermanence ingrains the thought, "I will soon separate from my body, possessions and friends," countering attachment. Ordinary fear of death, caused by leaving your attachments behind, diminishes. Impermanence awareness prepares you, causing changes behaviour and thinking. Your next life depends on causes you created. Death recollection is the leading principle of Dharma practice. Mindfulness of death and impermanence is concern about the causes you have created for your next life.

4' How to Cultivate Mindfulness of Death

The method of meditating on death is a clear outline that provides you with the reasons and insights that can make your meditation, stronger and more affective.

a" The Contemplation that Death is Certain

1" The Contemplation that the Lord of Death is Definitely Coming and Nothing Can Prevent it.

Death's inevitability is clear, yet a belief persists that it won't happen or not soon. We're all bound to die; no earthly power can change this fate. Even the Buddha and bodhisattvas faced death; their bodies and previous incarnations perished. You hold no special privilege; you will die too.

There's no escape from death once you're born; its timing is dictated by karma. All beings have died, are dying, or will die. Wise individuals grasp impermanence; death cannot be averted by fleeing, mantras, wealth, or any method.

We should be afraid of death now. We cannot wait until the moment of death to take action. That is too late.

2" The Contemplation that our Lifetime Cannot be Extended and Constantly Diminishes

Once you enter your mother's womb, your life shortens with each moment; your lifespan cannot be extended.

Your life's duration is dictated by past karma, slipping away moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day. Life moves inexorably towards death, like a river to a waterfall. Human life, though hard to obtain, is ephemeral. Each moment brings us closer to death, enhancing awareness of impermanence.

You will die soon; death isn't far away but swiftly approaching. Every moment is crucial. Thinking "Death is right in front of me" drives Dharma practice.

Forgetting death leads to disaster. Near death, clarity and self-help are lost. Embracing death may discomfort you, but it eliminates negative thoughts, promotes virtuous activity and accumulation of merit and prepares for death

3" The Contemplation of the Certainty of Death with the Recognition that even While You are Alive There is Little Time for Religious Practice

In Tibetan Buddhism, specific practices lead to goals achievable with time and effort. However, time is limited; much is wasted and remaining time is occupied by other activities. With age, capacity for Dharma practice weakens, leading to defeatist attitudes and excuses.

Still, you proceed to your future life alone; relatives, friends, wealth and reputation won't join you. Death is inevitable; nothing changes that. Since this life is temporary, solely pursuing it's goals is misguided. You have a choice in how you utilise this precious life, like standing at a cliff's edge. From here you can pull yourself up, or let yourself go down. It all depends on what you do in this life. But this life will soon finish. Your firm decision to practice the Dharma is imperative.

This is the first conclusion: "Since death is definite, I must practice the Dharma."

The Lord of Death shows no mercy; he takes lives indiscriminately, young or old, good or bad. This relentless force is ever-present.

These teachings aim to redirect from seeking worldly pleasures. Constantly striving, for the sensual goals of this life is a mistake.

Realising this entails recalling death and life's impermanence. Imagine facing an executioner; the Lord of Death is actually about to kill you. Such awareness reveals that all efforts for temporary pleasure culminate in death. Struggles for happiness often lead to conflicts, with hardships ultimately futile other than a few pleasures of this life. All your years of struggling to overcome difficulties will not help you survive. Contemplating this, one ponders, "If I die tomorrow, what should I do today?"

Happiness will come from turning your mind in the direction of this higher goal. You will know what you are doing and why you are doing it.

b" The Contemplation That the Time of Death is Uncertain

Although death is certain, its timing remains uncertain. You cannot pinpoint the day, month, or year. It could be today. Asking why not today yields no valid reason. This uncertainty fosters doubt, leading to the belief that not dying is possible, directing focus and energy toward future enjoyment. You're not thinking about making preparations for death, because it seems as though you may stay alive for many years to come. Neglecting preparations for death, you prioritise immediate comfort, assuming you'll live for many years. Acknowledging "I won't be here long; I'll soon leave" shifts focus to preparing for what comes next.

Intermittent interest in Dharma, listening to teachings and meditating is poor preparation and no benefit. Focused on immediate gratification, you strive for pleasure, antagonising others, driven by desire, anger, jealousy and pride.

A strong sense of "today, I might die" gives urgency to daily practice. Concentration deepens in every Dharma activity, preparing beyond this life. Consistent practice, meditation and study gives bedtime thoughts, "Now I'm going to sleep. I'll have no regret if I don't wake up. I've done everything I can to prepare for my death."

Your situation resembles a perpetual war, demanding constant vigilance. An impending, dangerous enemy looms, arrival uncertain – today, tomorrow, maybe months. Daily preparation becomes crucial; delaying isn't an option. You can't delay, thinking "I will prepare tomorrow." Each day requires mindfulness and readiness.

Constantly be mindful of death's reality; counter the illogical idea of immortality with reasons. Daily, consider the possibility of dying; timing remains uncertain.

1" The Contemplation That the Lifespan in This World is Uncertain

Life's length is uncertain for everyone. Some are healthy in the morning, gone by night; others die in their sleep—young or old; healthy or not. Famous or not, ready or not, convenient or not, prepared for death complete or not; death waits for no one.

Don't believe sudden death is for others elsewhere. You're not exempt. Death strikes anytime.

This awareness keeps you vigilant and your Dharma practice sincere.

2" The Contemplation That the Causes of Death are Many and the Causes of Life Few

Our body and life are delicate; even small incidents can harm or end us. The conditions for life are weaker than those for destruction. Many internal and external factors pose risks, making nothing truly safe. Even life-sustaining conditions can become causes of death. Trusting nothing, not even our bodies, is wise.

Many forces can destroy life, none can increase it. Life-supporting elements like food or medicine cannot extend lifespan. There's no elixir of life to extend years.

You live amid the conditions that will cause death,
like a lamp for burning in a howling wind.

Between life and death, there is nothing more than a breath. Not much. What's amazing is you're breathing when you go to sleep and still breathing when you wake up. So, every day upon waking, appreciate being alive.

The elements forming your body—blood, flesh, bones—don't grant eternal life. They combine into what we call "my body," which seems firm and brings pleasure, making us happy. Yet, these elements are not the cause of life but rather of our death.

Ignorance, wrong views and mental afflictions are on the rise; human lifespans are shortening and less pleasurable and human bodies and minds are declining in ability. Consequently, non-virtuous karma spreads and creating good karma is challenging because virtuous attitudes are rare. Even accumulated virtuous karma is weak and easily destroyed. With a small merit collection and common negative actions, even reciting mantras and prayers loses effectiveness; they cannot prolong your life.

The causes of death are many,
Those for staying alive are few.
And even they can become causes of death;
Therefore, always practice the Dharma

3" The Contemplation That the Time of Death is Uncertain Because the Body is Very Fragile

Do you possess any special security? Can you confidently say you'll live for the next hour? You cannot say it. Even if you're healthy and wealthy, there's no guarantee of continued life.

Recognising this, you see that your worldly concerns and preparations for the future compete. Keep your practice strong by meditating on death repeatedly. From this meditation, you'll understand the uncertainty of the Lord of Death's arrival, but when that moment arrives, the only true security lies within yourself. Therefore, decide firmly: "I will practice Dharma sincerely and with concentration starting now."

The Lord of Death is nobody's friend.
Suddenly, unexpectedly, he appears.
Do not wait saying, "I will do it tomorrow."
Practice the holy Dharma right away.

Saying, "I'll do it tomorrow and do this today"
Is not at all beneficial for people.
A tomorrow when you will no longer exist
Is a time that is undoubtedly coming.

You never know if tomorrow will come before death. Start preparing now. Practice the holy Dharma as soon and as often as possible, mentally and physically; as much as you can each day.

Tsongkhapa underscores death's uncertainty as the most important of the three root topics (Buddha, Dharma, Sangha). You should think about this topic in detail from various points of view. This will change your belief from longevity to the recognition that life may end at any moment. This reduces attachment to the present life and encourages preparation for death. This way of thinking and meditation leads to the conclusion: "Death's timing is uncertain, so I'll start Dharma practice immediately." Failing to prepare for death leads to disaster, but prior preparation eases the process when death arrives.

c" The Contemplation That at the Time of Death Nothing Helps Except Religious Practice

At death, all the wonderful things of his life –relatives, friends, wealth, possessions, reputation –you will leave them all behind. You cannot take even an atom into the next life. You will go alone to another world and your next life. Friends, resources or your body will not help. You have no idea what kind of life it will be you are going to.

1" Friends Will Not Help

When you are dying your relatives and friends may circle around your body, but the experience of dying is felt by you alone. None of them can share it with you. None of them can promise, "I will come with you," or "You won't go. I will protect you."

2" Resources Will Not Help

Regardless of your wealth, you can take nothing with you. You go alone, with nothing to your next life. Usually because of your strong attachment, it feels like you are tied to your life and wealth on an almost permanent basis. You are never satisfied; no matter how much you have you want more. This makes everything difficult. Thinking about death and impermanence lessens your attachment and increases your ability to be satisfied. This occurs because once you see the death is right in front of you, you realise that your food, clothes and housing are sufficient. There is no sense in constantly craving for more. You become satisfied with what you have and actually enjoy your positions.

3" Your Body Will Not Help

You would have to leave the body that you have had for your whole life. You gave it the best and healthiest of food, you dressed it well, beautified it and tried to make it strong. Despite all that effort, it will remain here and send you off by yourself.

Conclusion and Karma

The conclusion you should reach is that at the time of death nothing except for the Dharma or virtuous karma will be of benefit. Wealth, property, friends, power, youth, or strength will not help or go with you when you die. Everything will be left behind.

Putting effort into seeking short-term goals, such as fame, wealth or a moment of pleasure is a waste of that effort. Better to think "What will be helpful to me if I die today?" This will help you set long-term goals. It may be very unpleasant to recollect each morning, "I definitely will have to go alone—and it could happen today." But this meditation will lead you in the proper direction. It will bend your thoughts and actions in the most beneficial way. As you get closer and closer to death, you will feel more and more comfortable and secure.

Acknowledge that only the Dharma can be your protector, saviour and guide.

The Karma gave you your present life is used up. Just as your shadow always follows your body, two things always follow you: your virtuous and non-virtuous Karma. Actions make an impression in your mental continuum and will determine what will happen to you from now on. Ahead of you are the results of the karma you accumulated in this life. If you have created good karma, another good life – perhaps even a better life will follow. If you have done nothing positive and only committed harmful actions, then this new karma will lead you downward to misery and disaster.

Only you will experience the results of your karma; no one will share it with you.

It is not easy to live this way. It requires a lot of effort to become less attached to your body, wealth and concerns of this life. This meditation on death helps in various ways: it lessens attachment, reduces your interest in small, senseless things and will deepen your concern for what will happen after this life. If you practice cultivating this awareness, when death comes, you will have something that you can depend on.

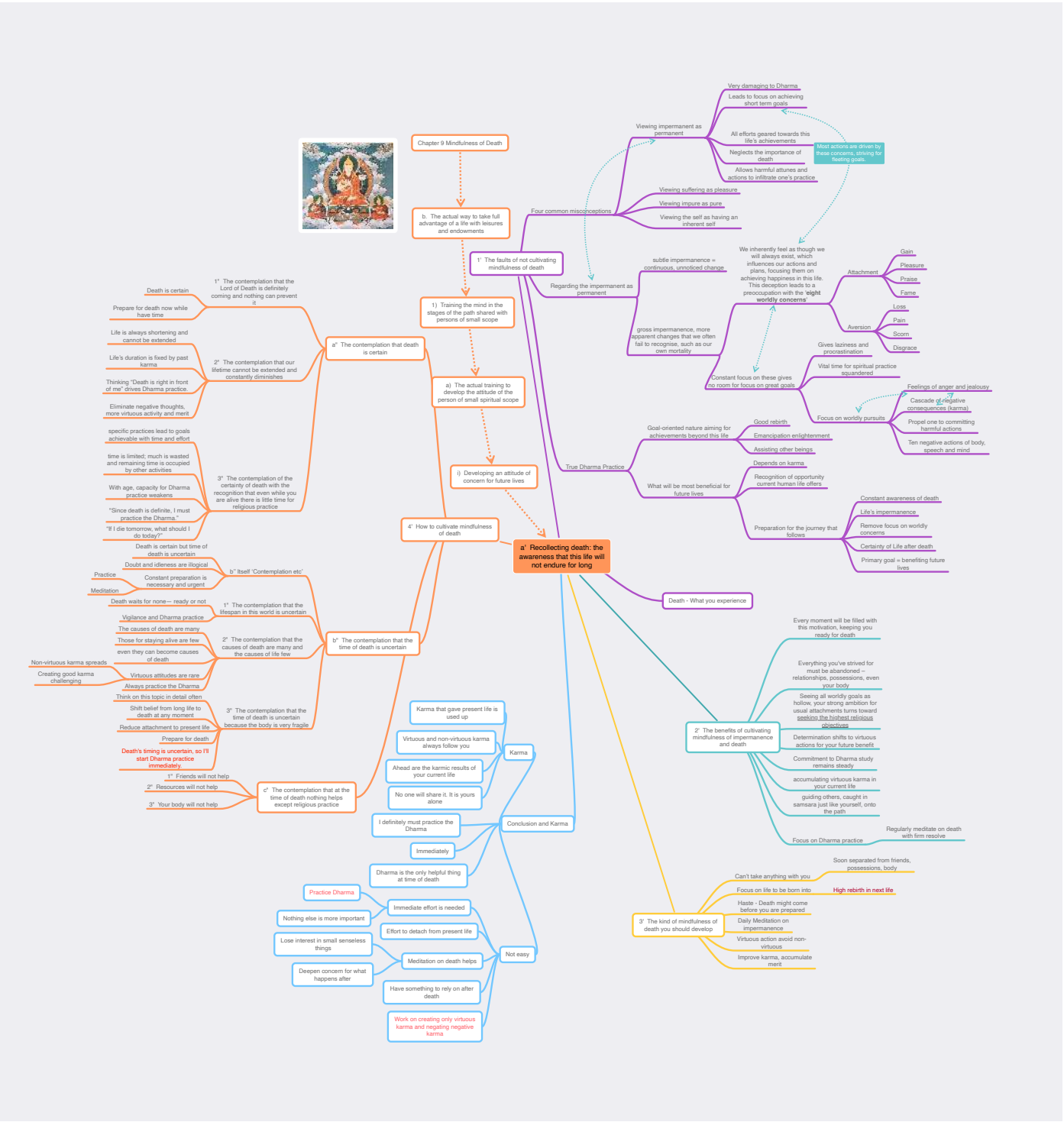
Do not look at death as something far away. Train yourself to think, "It is right here in front of me." Then, you will naturally ask, "What is the most helpful thing to do?" You will then apply yourself to the teachings and to creating pure, virtuous karma. "From now on, I will make a strong effort to practice the Dharma. I will not wait until tomorrow, or next year. I will start to practice right now."

The Dharma is the guide for those who don't know their way;
The Dharma is the provisions for a long voyage;
The Dharma is the leader for an arduous journey;
So fix your three doors on the Dharma from now on.

Charity may be your best approach for virtuous karma and merit. Helping others in whatever way you can, physically, verbally or financially, will return to you with interest.

Practising the Dharma must be your main activity. Nothing else is important. Lead your daily activity in that direction as much as you can. Follow the path. Let your capacity grow gradually as you follow each step of the path laid out in front of you.

From contemplating these topics you should reach three conclusions: I definitely must practice the Dharma; I must practice it immediately; and the Dharma is the only thing that will be helpful at the time of death.



Death - what you experience

It is very helpful to meditate on the death experience.

What you experience the death depends on what you did (virtue) in your life. Your experience at death and your rebirth are determined by your actions of body, speech and mind in this life. Death comes to each individual differently, uniquely – for some it comes very peacefully, for others there will be great pain, suffering and fear. The most powerful non-virtuous actions motivated by great hatred produce the greatest fear. Those who have experienced great negative karma experience perception distortion and see monstrous demons that are not actually there.

As the death process progresses, there are external signs, which may be apparent to an outside observer and internal signs which are only experienced by the dying person.

The process begins when you lose your physical strength. The external sign is that the body cannot function very well; it loses power and becomes uncontrollable. The internal sign is that the dying persons see something like a mirage in a desert.

The next external sign seen by other people is that the dying person's fluids drain away: his mouth and eyes become dry, his skin dehydrates and turns pale and his desiccated flesh becomes flaccid and loses shape and tone. Inside the experience is something like space becoming filled with drifting clouds of thin wispy smoke, as if a fire had burned out.

The next external sign is that the dying person's body heat slowly sleeps away. Sometimes the body starts to cool from the feet upwards to the heart. (May indicate the person is going to a higher rebirth). Sometimes it begins cooling from the head down to the heart. (May indicate the dying person will go to a lower rebirth in the next life.) Finally, the last heat leaves from the heart and the whole body becomes cold at that time. The internal experience is similar to watching fireflies on a dark night. It is also described as sparks sent up into space by wood crackling in a fire.

The next external sign is that breathing begins to fade. At first exhalations, become more rapid and inhalation becomes slower and weaker. More and more air goes out and inhalations gradually bring less in until this stops. The inner experience is a vision something like a small unflickering candle or a weak lamp. To an observer, it may appear that the person is now dead, because he is no longer breathing and all external expressions of life and gone. The body now looks like a corpse. However, the inner experience is still not finished and may continue for days or even weeks.

Much more detail is given. See Tibetan Book of the Dead.