

## DEATH

*Like a dream,  
Whatever I enjoy  
Will become a memory;  
The past is not revisited.*

—Shantideva

Find a comfortable place to sit, so that your back is upright, your body steady and balanced; then close your eyes and watch your breath. Feel the air enter your nostrils; expand your lungs and diaphragm. Pause, exhale, contracting diaphragm and lungs, then feel warmer air leave the nostrils. Sustain this attention for ten minutes, following each breath from beginning to end. Reflect on your resolve: What has led me to this point? Why am I sitting here? Try not to get caught up in trains of associative thought that lead off into distraction. When the mind is calm and focused, consider this question

*Since death alone is certain and the time of death uncertain, what should I do?*

Run this over in your mind, letting its import and challenge sink in. See if the question resonates in the body, triggers a nonverbal mood, a gut feeling. Give more attention to the bodily tone it evokes than to the thoughts and ideas it generates. If you feel such a tone, silently rest in it until it fades.

While you find the question intellectually stimulating, it might otherwise leave you cold. Or it may provoke only a pale hint of its implications. The aim of this meditation is to awaken a felt-sense of what it means to live a life that will stop. To deepen the question, the following reflections may help.

*Since death alone is certain . . .*

THINK OF THE beginnings of life on this earth: single-celled organisms dividing and evolving; the gradual emergence of fish, amphibians, and mammals, until the first human beings appeared around five million years ago; then the billions of men and women who preceded my own birth a mere handful of years ago. Each of them was born; each of them died. They died because they were born. What distinguishes me from any one of them? Did not they feel about the uniqueness of their lives just as I feel about the uniqueness of mine? Yet birth entails death as surely as meeting entails parting.

This miraculous organism, formed of an inconceivable number of interdependent parts, from the tiniest cell to the hemispheres of the brain, has evolved to a degree of complexity capable of the consciousness needed to make sense of these words. Life depends on sustaining this delicate balance, on the functioning of vital organs. Yet I feel it changing with each pulse of blood, slipping away with each breath. I witness my aging: the loss of hair, pain in the joints, wrinkling of skin. Life ebbs from moment to moment.

It is as though I am in a boat that floats steadily downstream. I gaze over the stern, admiring the

landscape that spreads out behind the vessel. So absorbed am I in what I behold that I forget that I am drifting inexorably toward a waterfall that drops for hundreds of feet.

*... and the time of death uncertain ...*

WHEN I TRY to turn my head around to find how close the waterfall is, I cannot. I can see only what is unfolding before my eyes. I can see the death of others but not my own. The time will come for me too, but I don't know when.

Consider that while statistics assure us that we have a good chance to live to an "average" age, probability is not certainty. There can be no guarantee that I will live until next week, let alone for many years. Who do I know of my own age who has died? Was there anything about that person that made him a suitable candidate for a sudden or early death? How does he differ from me? I imagine myself in his shoes. Death does not happen only to others. Nor when I want it to.

This body is fragile. It is just flesh. Listen to the heartbeat. Life depends on the pumping of a muscle.

Anything can happen. Each time I cross a road, set out on a journey, descend a flight of stairs, my life is at risk. No matter how cautious I am, I cannot foresee the absentmindedness of the man in an approaching car, the collapse of a bridge, the shift of a fault line, the course of a stray bullet, the destination of a virus. Life is accident prone.

*... what should I do?*

WHAT AM I here for? Am I living in such a way that I can die without regrets? How much of what I do is compromise? Do I keep postponing what I "really" want to do until conditions are more favorable?

Asking such questions interrupts indulgence in the comforts of routine and shatters illusions about a cherished sense of self-importance. It forces me to seek again the impulse that moves me from the depths, and to turn aside from the shallows of habitual patterns. It requires that I examine my attachments to physical health, financial independence, loving friends. For they are easily lost; I cannot ultimately rely on them. Is there anything I can depend upon?

It might be that all I can trust in the end is my integrity to keep asking such questions as: *Since death alone is certain and the time of death uncertain, what should I do?* And then to act on them.

A REFLECTION LIKE this does not tell you anything you do not already know: that death is certain and its time uncertain. The point is to consider these facts regularly and slowly, allowing them to percolate through you, until a felt-sense of their meaning and implication is awakened. Even when you do this reflection daily, sometimes you may feel nothing at all; the thoughts may strike you as repetitive, shallow, and pointless. But at other times you may feel gripped by an urgent bodily awareness of imminent mortality. At such moments try to let the thoughts fade, and focus the entirety of your attention in this feeling.

This meditation counters the deep psychosomatic feeling that there is something permanent at the core of oneself that is going to be around for a while yet. Intellectually, we may suspect such intuitions, but that is not how we feel most of the time. This feeling is not something that additional information or philosophy alone can affect. It needs to be challenged in its own terms.

Reflective meditation is a way of translating thoughts into the language of feeling. It explores the relation between the way we think about and perceive things and the way we feel about them. We find that even the strongest, seemingly self-evident intuitions about ourselves are based on equally deep-seated assumptions. Gradually learning to see our life in another way through reflective meditation leads to feeling different about it as well.

Ironically, we may discover that death meditation is not a morbid exercise at all. Only when we lose the use of something taken for granted (whether the telephone or an eye) are we jolted into a recognition of its value. When the phone is fixed, the bandage removed from the eye, we briefly rejoice in their restoration but swiftly forget them again. In taking them for granted, we cease to be conscious of them. In taking life for granted, we likewise fail to notice it. (To the extent that we get bored and long for something exciting to happen.) By meditating on death, we paradoxically become conscious of life.

How extraordinary it is to be here at all. Awareness of death can jolt us awake to the sensuality of existence. Breath is no longer a routine inhalation of air but a quivering intake of life. The eye is quickened to the play of light and shade and colour, the ear to the intricate medley of sound. This is where the meditation leads. Stay with it; rest in it. Notice how distraction is a flight from this, an escape from awe to worry and plans.