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(Aṭṭhaka) Maraṇa,sati Sutta 1

Or, Paṭhama (Aṭṭhaka) Maraṇa-s,sati Sutta

The First (Eights) Discourse on the Mindfulness of Death | A 8.73

Theme: The meditation of death should be done with every breath

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2008, 2015

1 Sutta summary and highlights

1.1 SUTTA SUMMARY. The Sutta opens with the Buddha exhorting the monks to practise the mindfulness of death,¹ declaring that it can lead to nirvana [§§1-4]. The monks respond individually, each saying how dedicated he is to the practice.

The first monk declares that for “a night and a day,” and seven other monks, too, respond, each with progressively greater dedication than the preceding [§§5-20]. It is important for us to understand the meaning of such statements and their progression [1.2]. The idea is essentially that of reflecting on the shortness or uncertainty of life.

The Buddha then declares that those monks who reflect on the brevity of life and possibility of dying as being only a night and a day [§6], as only a day [§8], as only half a day [§10], as just the duration of a single meal [§12], as just the duration of half a meal-time [§14], as just the time to chew 4-5 morsels [§16]—that is, the first 6 monks—as not putting in enough effort for the purposes attaining arhathood [§22].

Those practitioners who reflect on the brevity of life and possibility of death as being just the time to chew and swallow a single morsel [§18], and as just the time to breathe in and out (a single breath) [§20]—they truly practise for the sake of attaining arhathood in this life itself [§25]. The Sutta closes with the Buddha admonishing monastics to practise the mindfulness of death in this way [§26].

1.2 TEACHING COMMENTARY

1.2.1 Not enough diligence. We need to understand the drift of the Dharma as regards the mindfulness of death in this Sutta. The Buddha declares that the first 6 methods are not “diligent” enough. In other words, the practice is not sustained enough for the full benefit (awakening) that the mindfulness has to offer.

(1) When the first monk says that he practises mindfulness of death for “**a night and a day**,” it is like our saying in modern idiom: “I will be mindful of death everyday.” [§6]

(2) The monk who says that he practises mindfulness of death for “**only a day**” [§8], means that he will be mindful of death during the day (that is, from dawn to dusk). By extension, we can say that “day,” in this case, can also refer to “a whole night.” In other words, the duration is about 12 hours.

(3) “**Only half a day**” [§10], then, can mean either half of the day-time, or half of the night, that is, about 6 hours. The notion of time in terms of a day should be understood relative to the context of the teachings here. The timing here is not in absolute terms, but to help us envision a sense of impermanence and urgency of practice.

(4) “**Just the time it takes to eat a single alms-meal**” [§12]. The Subcommentary notes that the almsfood should be sufficient to sustain him for a day.² Following the context or drift of the Sutta, we must say that (1) he would reflect on the mindfulness of death while he is taking his day’s meal, and (2)

¹ For details on the theories about death and the practice of the mindfulness of death, see **Death and Buddhism**, SD 48.1.

² *Ekam divasam yāpana-p-pahonakam piṇḍapātam* (AAṬ:Be 3:98).

he would reflect that his meal would only sustain him for a day, and if he keeps on missing his meal (say, for more than a week), he would surely die.³

(5) “Just the duration of half a meal-time” [§14], which is, clearly, much shorter than a full meal-time. The import here is probably the meal is unfinished for any reason. **The (Aṭṭhaka) Maraṇa,sati Sutta 2** (A 8.74), for example, gives this reflection: “My food might not agree with me...that would be the death of me, or, this would be an obstacle to me!” (A 8.74,6).⁴

(6) “Just the time to chew 4-5 morsels” [§16], which would take only about 5-10 minutes, even at the slow mindful rate at which a contemplative monastic would chew his food. The monk is saying that even if he were to live for that long, or have such a short time of living consciousness left, he would dedicate it to the mindfulness of death.

1.2.2 Watching the moment. The Buddha, however, declares that all such approaches are not diligent enough for the purpose of attaining arhathood in this life itself [§22]. Only the last two practitioners are keenly practising for the sake of arhathood here and now. The reason for this is important for us to understand: it is not the quantity or length of time that we take to reflect on death, but the quality, that is, the presence of our mind with every mouthful that we chew and swallow, and every moment that we breathe in and out. In short, it works best when the mindfulness of death, as with any meditation practice, when we *sustain it* every waking moment, as far as possible.

(7) “Just the time it takes to chew and swallow a single morsel” [§18]. Even as we chew a single morsel of food, and swallow a single morsel of food—a moment of chewing, a moment of swallowing—we should be mindful of death. Buddhaghosa calls this “the shortness of the moment” (*khaṇa,parittata*), which he explains as follows.

“In the ultimate sense, the life-moment of beings is extremely short, being only just the passing of a single moment of consciousness (*eka,citta-p,pavatti,matta*). Just as a chariot wheel, when it is rolling, rolls on only a single point (the tangent), and when it is at rest, rests only on a single point, so, too, the life of living beings *lasts only just the passing of a single moment of consciousness.*” (Vism 8.38)

This moment (*khaṇa*) is not a unit of time, but simply when our attention is fixed on what is occurring right now before us (that is, the mind). This is the “non-self” of the moment, whose reality is dependent of what has arisen just before, and is the condition for what arises after that.

(8) “Just the time it takes to breathe in and then out, to breathe out and then in” [§20]. This is, of course, a variation of the mindfulness of breath (*ānāpāna,sati*), the key early Buddhist meditation, used by the Buddha himself to bring about his full self-awakening.⁵ Buddhaghosa, continuing his commentary on death and the breath, says:

“When that mind (*citta*; that is, a moment of consciousness) has ceased, the being is said to have ceased. Thus it is said: ‘In a past conscious moment, he *lived*, neither he lives nor he will live. In the present conscious moment, he did not live, he *lives*, not he will live.

*Jīvitam̐ attā,bhāvo ca sukha,dukkhā ca kevalā
eka,citta,samāyuttā lahuso vattate khaṇo
ye niruddhā marantassa tiṭṭhamānassa vā idha
sabbe pi sadisā khandhā gatā appaṭisandhiyā*

³ Cf Bodhi’s interpretation at A:B 1753 n1286.

⁴ A 8.74,6 @ SD 48.6.

⁵ See the first dhyana episode (M 26,31 f/1:246 f), during the ploughing festival (*vappa,maṅgala*), when the boy Siddhattha practises the mindfulness of the breath (MA 2:290 f; J 1:57). See **Satipaṭṭhāna S** (M 10/1:55-63), SD 13.3; called the noble abode, perfect abode, Tathagata’s abode: **lcchā,naṅgala S** (S 54.11/5:326), SD 44.9; **Anāpāna,sati S** (M 118), SD 7.13. It leads to the eightfold path (MA 1:236).

*anibbattena na jāto, paccuppanna jīvati
citta, bhāṅgā mato loko, paññatti paramatthiyā'ti*

(Nm 42)

Life, personhood,⁶ and pleasure and pain—all these join in one same conscious moment that flickers quickly by, the ceased aggregates, whether of the dead or the living, here, are all alike, gone, never to link back again. Without arising (of consciousness), there is no birth; one lives only in the present. When consciousness [the mind] ceases, the world is dead—in the ultimate sense of the concept.”

This is the way to reflect on the shortness of the moment. (Vism 8.38)

1.3 DEATH AND THE BREATH. In this connection, **the Mahā Rāhul'ovāda Sutta** (M 62) closes with the Buddha declaring: “Rāhula, when the mindfulness of in-and-out-breathing is cultivated and continuously developed in this manner, even the last breath leaves [ends] with your knowledge, not without it.”⁷ When a dying person is mindful of his breath, he dies calmly with mindfulness and clear comprehension.

The Visuddhi, magga says: “Herein there are 3 kinds of final breaths on account of cessation, that is to say, final in *becoming*, final in *dhyana*, final in *death*. For, among the various kinds of existence, in-breaths and out-breaths occur only in the sense-sphere existence, not in the form-existence nor the formless existence. That is why there are final ones in existence. They occur in the first three dhyanas but not in the fourth. That is why there are final ones in the dhyanas. Those that arise along with the sixteenth consciousness-moment preceeding the death-consciousness cease together with the death-consciousness. They are called ‘final in death.’ “Final” here refers to these last moments (Vism 8.241/291 f).⁸

2 Related suttas

2.1 The (Aṭṭhaka) Maraṇa, sati Sutta 1 (A 8.73), which lists 8 ways of cultivating the mindfulness of death, is an expanded version of **the (Chakka) Maraṇa, sati Sutta 1** (A 6.19), which gives the key list of 6 ways of cultivating it. In both Suttas, all except the last two methods, are declared by the Buddha to be not as effective as the last two methods [§§21-22].

The closing sections (§§17-22) of **the (Chakka) Maraṇa, sati Sutta 1** (A 6.19), the shorter of the two Suttas, are quoted in the Visuddhi, magga in its chapter on the mindfulness of death (Vism 8.36 f/237 f).⁹ They illustrate the practice of the mindfulness of death by way of the brevity of the human condition, which is the seventh of the 8 methods it prescribes.¹⁰

2.2 The (Aṭṭhaka) Maraṇa, sati Sutta 2 (A 8.74) immediately follows its first namesake, and is an expanded version of **the (Chakka) Maraṇa, sati Sutta 2** (A 6.20). The former, which is an extended version of the latter, lists 8 ways in which a meditator (or any of us) could die. Hence, we should not

⁶ “Personhood,” *atta, bhāva*, a late term for “personal existence.”

⁷ *Ye pi te carimakā assāsā te pi veditvā nirujjhanti no aviditā ti* (M 62,30/1:426 f) n, SD 3.11.

⁸ On the 17 thought-moments, see Abdh 4.6, rev tr Bodhi 2nd ed 1999:153 ff. For a brief explanation, see G P Sumanapala, *An Introduction to Theravada Abhidhamma*, Singapore, 1998:137 (ch 8). For a comparative study of the closing, see Intro (5)

⁹ A 6.19 (SD 48.11).

¹⁰ The 8 methods for practising mindfulness of death are (1) it is like the appearance of a murderer, (2) it is like the ruin of success, (3) by comparing oneself to others, (4) the sharing of the body with many, (5) the frailty of life, (6) being signless, (7), the brevity of life; and (8) the shortness of the moment. (Vism 8,36 f/237 f), SD 48.11.

waste any effort or time in practising the mindfulness of death for the attaining of liberation. The latter gives only the 6 key conditions for death, omitting the last two conditions, that is,

- (7) death arising from an attack by humans, and
- (8) death arising from an attack by non-humans.

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(Aṭṭhaka) Maraṇa,sati Sutta 1

The First (Eights) Discourse on the Mindfulness of Death

A 8.73

The Buddha exhorts the monks

- 1 At one time, the Blessed One was staying in the brick house¹¹ at Nādika [Ñātika].¹²
- 2 There, the Blessed One addressed the monks, [317] “Bhikshus!”
“Bhante!” the monks replied to the Blessed One in assent.
- 3 “Bhikshus, the mindfulness of death, when cultivated, grown, is of great fruit, great benefit, plunging towards nirvana, whose goal is nirvana.¹³
- 4 You, bhikshus, cultivate the mindfulness of death!”¹⁴

The monks’ responses

- 5 (1) When this was said, a certain monk said this to the Blessed One:
“I, bhante, cultivate the mindfulness of death.”
- 6 “But how, bhikshu, do you cultivate the mindfulness of death?
“Here, bhante, I do it thus:
‘Indeed,¹⁵ should I live¹⁶ only a night and a day,¹⁷

¹¹ **The brick house** (*gīṇjak’āvasatha*) is mentioned in **Mahā,parinibbāna S** (D 16,2.5/2:91 + 2.10/2:96), SD 9; **Jana,vasabha S** (D 18,1/2:200), SD 62.3; **Cūḷa Go,siṅga S** (M 31,1/1:205), SD 41.11; V 1:232. It is specially mentioned because generally other buildings are made of wood (MA 2:235).

¹² **Nādikā** or **Ñātikā** (according to Buddhaghosa, two villages of the same name on the same river bank) was on the highroad between Koti,gāma and Vesālī (V 1:230 ff; D 2:90 f, 200; M 1:205). The Buddha’s instructions to Ānanda given here are also recorded in the Saṃyutta, which has **Ñātika** as the place-name (S 5:356 ff.). Comys to both the Dīgha and the Saṃyutta confirm it as “Ñātika,” explaining that “There were two villages close by the same pond, inhabited by the sons of two brothers. Thus, both of them were called Ñātika (‘of the relatives’)” (DA 2:543; SA 2:74).

¹³ *Maraṇa-s,sati bhikkhave bhāvitā bahulī,katā maha-p,phalā hoti mahānisaṃsā amat’ogadhā amata,pariyosānā*. Significantly, the mindfulness of death, properly done, can lead to the attaining of nirvana: see [§3].

¹⁴ *Bhāvettha no tumhe bhikkhave maraṇa-s,satin’ti*.

¹⁵ “Indeed,” *aho vata*, which Comy explains as an indeclinable expressing longing (*patthān,atthe nipāto*) (AA 3:351). Here, clearly, the desire is for the practice of mindfulness of death, not for living only a night and a day! It would be clear from the Sutta context that it is a “progressive anticipation” of the last remark, viz, being mindful of death with every breath we take [§37].

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One's teaching, much indeed would be done by me!¹⁸
Thus, bhante, I cultivate the mindfulness of death."

7 (2) Then, a certain monk said this to the Blessed One:

"I, too, bhante, cultivate the mindfulness of death."

8 "But how, bhikshu, do you cultivate the mindfulness of death?"

"Here, bhante, I do it thus:

'Indeed, should I live only a day,

*I would wisely attend to the Blessed One's teaching, much indeed would be done by me!*¹⁹

Thus, bhante, I cultivate the mindfulness of death."

9 (3) Then, a certain monk said this to the Blessed One:

"I, too, bhante, cultivate the mindfulness of death."

10 "But how, bhikshu, do you cultivate the mindfulness of death?"

"Here, bhante, I do it thus:

'Indeed, should I live only half a day,²⁰

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One's teaching, much indeed would be done by me!

Thus, bhante, I cultivate the mindfulness of death."

11 (4) Then, a certain monk said this to the Blessed One:

"I, too, bhante, cultivate the mindfulness of death."

12 "But how, bhikshu, do you cultivate the mindfulness of death?"

"Here, bhante, I do it thus:

'Indeed, should I live just the time it takes to eat a single alms-meal,²¹

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One's teaching, much indeed would be done by me!

Thus, bhante, I cultivate the mindfulness of death."

13 (5) Then, a certain monk said this to the Blessed One:

"I, too, bhante, cultivate the mindfulness of death."

14 "But how, bhikshu, do you cultivate the mindfulness of death?"

"Here, [318] bhante, I do it thus:

¹⁶ "Should I live," *jīveyyāṃ*, 1 sg potential ("Should I; could be; may be"): see Warder, *Introduction to Pali*, 2nd ed, 1974:86. Geiger, *A Pāli Grammar*, 2000 §128.

¹⁷ Bodhi, quoting the Chinese parallel, EĀ 40.8, says that it is in substantial agreement with Comy (AA 3:351 ad A 6.19: see foll n). Thus, EĀ records the first monk as saying: "When I contemplate the perception of death, I wish to live on for 7 days to contemplate the 7 awakening-factors, which is to greatly benefit from the Tathagata's teaching, so that I'll have no regrets at death." 思維死想時。意欲存七日。思維七覺意。於如來法中多所饒益。死後無恨。 *Sī wéi sī xiǎng shí, yì yù cún qī rì, sī wéi qī jué yì, yú rúlái fǎ zhōng duō suǒ ráo yì, sǐ hòu wú hèn.* (EA 40.8 @ T1.741c26-742b2). The phrase 死後 (lit "after dying") is idiomatic. The Chin tr differs from Bodhi's, which has "(and after death I will have no regrets," which sounds odd (A:B 1753 n1284). See (1.2 (1)).

¹⁸ *Aho vatāhaṃ rattin, divaṃ jīveyyāṃ, bhagavato sāsanaṃ manasi kareyyāṃ, bahuṃ* [Ee; Be Ce Se bahu] *vata me kataṃ assāti.* Comy on A 6.19 ad loc): "Much should be done by us in the teaching" (*tumhākaṃ sāsane māma kiccaṃ bahu kataṃ assa*, AA 3:351), ie, much indeed would be done of the renunciant's duties, which would be to my benefit (*bahu vata mayā atta, hitaṃ pabbajita, kiccaṃ kataṃ bhavēyya* AAṬ:Be 3:98).

¹⁹ The whole quote: *Aho vatāhaṃ divasaṃ jīveyyāṃ, bhagavato sāsanaṃ manasi kareyyāṃ, bahu vata me kataṃ assāti.* See (1.2 (2)).

²⁰ "Half a day," *Upaḍḍha, divasaṃ.* See (1.2 (3)).

²¹ Comy notes that the almsfood should be sufficient to sustain him for a day (*ekam divasaṃ yāpana-p-pahona-kam piṇḍapātam*, AAṬ:Be 3:98). See (1.2 (4)).

'Indeed, should I live just the time it takes to eat half an alms-meal,²²

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One's teaching, much indeed would be done by me!
Thus, bhante, I cultivate the mindfulness of death."

15 (6) Then, a certain monk said this to the Blessed One:

"I, too, bhante, cultivate the mindfulness of death."

16 "But how, bhikshu, do you cultivate the mindfulness of death?"

"Here, bhante, I do it thus:

'Indeed, should I live just the time it takes to chew and swallow four or five morsels,²³

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One's teaching, much indeed would be done by me!
Thus, bhante, I cultivate the mindfulness of death."

17 (7) Then, a certain monk said this to the Blessed One:

"I, too, bhante, cultivate the mindfulness of death."

18 "But how, bhikshu, do you cultivate the mindfulness of death?"

"Here, bhante, I do it thus:

'Indeed, should I live just the time it takes to chew and swallow a single morsel,²⁴

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One's teaching, much indeed would be done by me!
Thus, bhante, I cultivate the mindfulness of death."

19 (8) Then, a certain monk said this to the Blessed One:

"I, too, bhante, cultivate the mindfulness of death."

20 "But how, bhikshu, do you cultivate the mindfulness of death?"

"Here, bhante, I do it thus:

'Indeed, should I live just the time it takes to breathe in and then out, to breathe out and then in,²⁵

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One's teaching, much indeed would be done by me!
Thus, bhante, I cultivate the mindfulness of death."

The Buddha's response

21 (1) Bhikshus, that monk who cultivates the mindfulness of death in this way:

'Indeed, should I live only a night and a day,

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One's teaching, much indeed would be done by me!

(2) Bhikshus, that monk who cultivates the mindfulness of death in this way:

'Indeed, [319] should I live only a day,

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One's teaching, much indeed would be done by me!

(3) Bhikshus, that monk who cultivates the mindfulness of death in this way:

'Indeed, should I live only half a day,

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One's teaching, much indeed would be done by me!

(4) Bhikshus, that monk who cultivates the mindfulness of death in this way:

'Indeed, should I live just the time it takes to eat a single alms-meal,

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One's teaching, much indeed would be done by me!

²² See (1.2 (5)).

²³ *Idha mayhaṃ bhante evaṃ hoti "aho vatāhaṃ tad-antaraṃ jīveyyaṃ, yad-antaraṃ cattāro pañca ālope saṅkhādītvaṃ ajjhoharāmi. See (1.2 (6)).*

²⁴ *Idha mayhaṃ bhante evaṃ hoti "aho vatāhaṃ tad-antaraṃ jīveyyaṃ, yad-antaraṃ ekaṃ ālopaṃ saṅkhādītvaṃ ajjhoharāmi. See (1.2 (7)).*

²⁵ *Idha mayhaṃ bhante evaṃ hoti "aho vatāhaṃ tad-antaraṃ jīveyyaṃ, yad-antaraṃ assasitvā vā passasāmi, passasitvā vā assasāmi. See (1.2 (8)).*

(5) Bhikshus, that monk who cultivates the mindfulness of death in this way:

‘Indeed, should I live just the time it takes to eat half an alms-meal,

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One’s teaching, much indeed would be done by me!’ and

(6) Bhikshus, that monk who cultivates the mindfulness of death in this way:

‘Indeed, should I live just the time it takes to chew and swallow four or five morsels,

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One’s teaching, much indeed would be done by me!—

22 Those monks, bhikshus, are said to dwell without diligence.

They (only) slowly cultivate the mindfulness of death for the destruction of the influxes.²⁶

23 (7) But, bhikshus, as for that monk who cultivates the mindfulness of death in this way:

‘Indeed, should I live just the time it takes to chew and swallow a single morsel,

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One’s teaching, much indeed would be done by me!’

24 (8) And, bhikshus, that monk who cultivates the mindfulness of death in this way:

‘Indeed, should I live just the time it takes to breathe in and then out, to breathe out and then in,

I would wisely attend to the Blessed One’s teaching, much indeed would be done by me!—

25 Those monks, bhikshus, are said to dwell diligently.

They keenly cultivate the mindfulness of death for the destruction of the influxes.²⁷

26 Therefore, bhikshus, train yourself thus:

‘We will dwell diligently. We will keenly cultivate the mindfulness of death for the destruction of the influxes.’

Thus, bhikshus, you should train yourself.”

— evaṃ —

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²⁶ Both sentences: *Ime vuccanti bhikkhave bhikkhū pamattā viharanti, dandhaṃ maraṇa-s,satiṃ bhāventi āsavānaṃ khayāya*. There are the 4 influxes (*āsava*), those of (1) sense-desire (*kām’āsava*), (2) (desire for eternal) existence (*bhav’āsava*), (3) views (*diṭṭh’āsava*), (4) ignorance (*avijj’āsava*). The destruction of influxes (*āsava-k,khaya*) is synonymous with the attaining of arhathood.

²⁷ Both sentences: *Ime vuccanti bhikkhave bhikkhū appamattā viharanti, tikkhaṃ maraṇa-s,satiṃ bhāventi āsavānaṃ khayāya*.