

6

(Aṭṭhaka) Maraṇa,sati Sutta 2

Dutīya (Aṭṭhaka) Maraṇa-s,sati Sutta

The Second (Eights) Discourse on the Mindfulness of Death | A 8.74

Theme: The mindfulness of death night and day facilitates awakening

Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2008, 2015

1 Sutta highlights

1.1 The (Aṭṭhaka) Maraṇa,sati Sutta 2 (A 8.74) is an expanded version of **the (Chakka) Maraṇa,sati Sutta 2** (A 6.20).¹ The former, the longer Sutta, lists 8 ways in which a meditator (or any of us) could die. The idea is to arouse in us a sense of urgency (*saṃvega*), so that we are motivated to practise to attain some level of awakening in this life itself. As a lay person, we should at least work to attain streamwinning here and now.²

1.2 The (Aṭṭhaka) Maraṇa,sati Sutta 2 lists the following 8 ways in which we could die if we are meditating alone, especially in a forest:

- (1) we could be stung by a snake, a scorpion, or a centipede;
- (2) we could stumble and fall;
- (3) our food might not agree with us;
- (4) our bile might act up (liver problem);
- (5) our phlegm might act up (lung problem);
- (6) sharp winds in us might act up (muscular or nervous problem);
- (7) we could be attacked by other people; or
- (8) we could be attacked by non-humans (eg wild animals, or unknown causes).

1.3 Hence, we should not waste any effort or time—night [§§4-12] or day [§§13-20]—to practise the mindfulness of death for the attaining of liberation.

The (Chakka) Maraṇa,sati Sutta 2 gives only the 6 key conditions for death, omitting the last two conditions.

2 The 8 causes of bodily pain

2.1 Various suttas—such as **the Sīvaka Sutta** (S 36.21),³ **the Samaṇa-m-acala Sutta 1** (A 4.87),⁴ **the (Samaṇa) Sukhumāla Sutta** (A 5.104),⁵ **the (Ābādhika) Giri-m-ānanda Sutta** (A 10.60),⁶ list these 8 causes of bodily pains, namely:

- | | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|-------|
| (1) bile | <i>pitta</i> | [1.2] |
| (2) phlegm | <i>semha</i> (Skt <i>śleṣman</i>) | |
| (3) wind | <i>vāta</i> | |
| (4) a combination of (1-3) | <i>sannipatika</i> | |
| (5) weather changes | <i>utu pariṇāma,ja</i> | |

¹ For **(Chakka) Maraṇa,sati S 2** (A 6.20), see SD 48.12.

² See **(Anicca) Cakkhu S** (S 25.1), SD 16.7.

³ S 36.21/4:230 f @ SD 5.6.

⁴ A 4.87,5/2:87 @ SD 20.13.

⁵ A 5.104/3:131 @ SD 46.9.

⁶ A 10.60,7/5:110 @ SD 15.11.

(6) improper care	<i>visama,parihāra,ja</i>
(7) external trauma	<i>opakkamika</i>
(8) karmic result	<i>kamma,vipāka,ja</i>

According to the (Samaṇa) Sukhumala Sutta, one who is disease-free is said to be free from these 8 causes (cf Nm 370). In **the Milinda,pañha**, Nāgasena discusses the 8 causes of suffering in the context of the Buddha's lack of moral vice. All this attests to the early history of this aetiology (Miln 134 f).

2.2 The first three—bile, phlegm and wind—are, according to ancient Buddhist medicine, the 3 peccant (illness-causing) humours.⁷ These three humours are listed as conditions (4-6) [1.2]. It would be difficult for a solitary forest meditator who falls sick in a remote jungle area to find help, and, as a result, may not recover from his sickness and die.

Disagreeable food (condition 3) [2.1] may work as a combination (*sannipāta*) of bile, phlegm and wind, or any of them—to make us ill. The remaining life-threatening conditions [2.1]—being stung by poisonous agent, a bad fall, an attack by humans and by non-humans—are classed under external trauma (*opakkamika*).

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(Aṭṭhaka) Maraṇasati Sutta 2

The Second (Eights) Discourse on the Mindfulness of Death

A 8.74

The Buddha exhorts the monks

- 1 At one time, the Blessed One was staying in the brick house⁸ at Nādika [Ñātika].⁹
- 2 There, the Blessed One addressed the monks, “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 into nirvana, ending in nirvana.¹⁰

⁷ See SD 5.6 (1.3).

⁸ **The brick house** (*giñjak'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).

⁹ **Nādikā** or **Ñātikā** (according to Buddhaghosa, two villages of the same name on the same river bank) was on the highroad between Kuṭṭigāramaka and Vaiśālī (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).

¹⁰ *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 §21.

Night reflection

4 How, bhikshus, is *the mindfulness of death*, when cultivated, grown, of great fruit, great benefit, plunging into nirvana, ending in nirvana?

5 Here, bhikshus, when day has ended and night has fallen,¹¹ a monk reflects thus:¹²

‘Many are the causes of [conditions for] my death!

- (1) A snake could sting me, or
a scorpion could sting me, or
a centipede could sting me.

*bahukā kho me paccayā maraṇassa
ahi vā maṃ ḍaṃseyya
vicchiko vā maṃ ḍaṃseyya
satapadī vā maṃ ḍaṃseyya*

REFRAIN:

That would be the death of me,¹³
this would be an obstacle for me!

*tena me assa kāla, kiriyā
so mama’ssa antarāyo*

- 6**¹⁴ (2) I might stumble and fall, or
(3) my food might not agree with me, or
(4) my bile might act up, or
(5) my phlegm might act up, or
(6) sharp winds in me might act up, or
(7) humans might attack me, or
(8) non-humans might attack me.

*upakkhalitvā vā papateyyaṃ,
bhataṃ vā me bhuttaṃ vyāpajjeyya
pittaṃ vā me kuppeyya
semhaṃ vā me kuppeyya
satthakā vā me vātā kuppeyyuṃ
manussā vā maṃ upakkameyyuṃ
amanussā vā maṃ upakkameyyuṃ*

REFRAIN:

That would be the death of me, or
this would be an obstacle to me!

*tena me assa kāla, kiriyā
so mama assa antarāyo’ti.*

Self-review: Death in the night

7 Bhikshus, it should be reflected by this monk, thus:

‘Are there in me bad unwholesome states that are unabandoned, that would be an obstacle should I die in the night?’¹⁵

8 If, bhikshus, a monk reflecting in this way, knows thus:

‘There *are* in me bad unwholesome states that have not been abandoned, that would be an obstacle should I die in the night.’

9 Then, bhikshus, that monk should work on the abandoning of just those bad unwholesome states, with extraordinary enthusiasm and effort and industry and great perseverance and relentlessness and mindfulness and clear comprehension.¹⁶

10 PARABLE OF THE BURNING HEAD. Bhikshus, just as one whose turban is ablaze, or whose head is ablaze, would act with extraordinary enthusiasm and effort and industry and great perseverance and relentlessness and mindfulness and clear comprehension to put out the fire on that turban or that head,¹⁷

¹¹ *Paṭihitāya* or *paṭihitāya* is past part of *patidahati* (Skt *pratidadhāti*: SED sv *prati-dhā*, “to commence, begin, approach”). Comy glosses it as “has reached” (*paṭipannāya*, AA 3:352). This is a rare form, found only in A 6.20 and A 8.74. It is found neither in PED nor in CPD.

¹² *Idha bhikkhave bhikkhu divase nikkhante rattiyā paṭihitāya* [Be *paṭihitāya*; Be:Ka *patigatāya*; Ce *pahitāya*; Ee *Se paṭihitāya*] *iti paṭisañcikkhati*.

¹³ “The death of me,” usu idiomatic, alluding to something disastrous, eg, “This task will be the death of me!” Here, however, it is to be taken literally.

¹⁴ In practical reflection, we can, if we wish, add the refrain after each of the other 7 lines.

¹⁵ *Atthi nu kho me pāpakā akusalā dhammā appahīnā, ye me assu rattim kalam karontassa antarāyāyāti*.

¹⁶ *Tena bhikkhave bhikkhunā tesam yeva pāpakānam akusalānam dhammānam pahānāya adhimatto chando ca vāyāmo ca ussāho ca usso!hī ca appaṭivānī ca sati ca sampajaññañ ca karaṇiyam*.

even so, bhikshus, *that monk should work on the abandoning of just those bad [321] unwholesome states, with extraordinary enthusiasm and effort and industry and great perseverance and relentlessness and mindfulness and clear comprehension.*

Self-review: Inner purification

11 If, bhikshus, a monk reflecting in this way, knows thus:

‘There are *no* bad unwholesome states in me that are unabandoned, that would be an obstacle should I die in the night.’

12 Then, bhikshus, he should dwell in that very zest and gladness, training night and day in wholesome states.¹⁸

Day reflection

13 Here, bhikshus, when night has ended and day has dawned, a monk reflects thus:

‘*Many are the causes of my death [the conditions for my death]!*

(1) *A snake could sting me, or a scorpion could sting me, or a centipede could sting me.*

That would be the death of me, this would an obstacle for me!

14 (2) *I might stumble and fall, or*

(3) *my food might not agree with me, or*

(4) *my bile might act up, or*

(5) *my phlegm might act up, or*

(6) *sharp winds in me might act up, or*

(7) *humans might attack me, or*

(8) *non-humans might attack me.*

That would be the death of me, or this would be an obstacle to me!’

Self-review: Death in the day

15 Bhikshus, it should be reflected by this monk, thus:

‘Are there in me bad unwholesome states that are unabandoned, that would be an obstacle should I die in the day?’¹⁹

16 If, bhikshus, a monk reflecting in this way, knows thus:

‘There *are* in me bad unwholesome states that have not been abandoned, that would be an obstacle should I die in the day.’

17 Then, bhikshus, *that monk should work on the abandoning of just those bad unwholesome states, with extraordinary enthusiasm and effort and industry and great perseverance and relentlessness and mindfulness and clear comprehension.*

18 PARABLE OF THE BURNING HEAD. *Bhikshus, just as one whose turban is ablaze, or whose head is ablaze, would act with extraordinary enthusiasm and effort and industry and great perseverance and relentlessness and mindfulness and clear comprehension to put out the fire on that turban or that head, even so, bhikshus, that monk should work on the abandoning of just those bad unwholesome states, with extraordinary enthusiasm and effort and industry and great perseverance and relentlessness and mindfulness and clear comprehension.*

¹⁷ This parable recurs at **Cela S** (S 56.34), regarding the urgency of realizing the 4 noble truths (S 56.34/5:441).

¹⁸ *Tena bhikkhave bhikkhunā ten’eva pīti, pāmojjena vihātabbarā aho, rattānusikkhinā kusalesu dhammesu.*

¹⁹ *Atthi nu kho me pāpakā akusalā dhammā appahīnā, ye me assu rattiṃ kālāṃ karontassa antarāyāyāti.*

Self-review: Inner purification

19 If, bhikshus, a monk reflecting in this way, knows thus:

‘There are *no* bad unwholesome states in me [322] that are unabandoned, that would be an obstacle should I die in the day.’

20 Then, bhikshus, he should dwell in that very zest and gladness, training night and day in wholesome states.

21 Thus, bhikshus, the mindfulness of death, when cultivated, grown, is of great fruit, great benefit, plunging into nirvana, ending in nirvana.

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