

Meditare mortem & Mindfulness of Death

Post by “Don” of February 29, 2020 at 10:56 AM

Excellent points, [Cassius](#) ! Thank you for the reminder about Lucretius. I personally found DRN Book III (the title of which Stalling translates as "Mortality and the Soul") powerful and unexpected on my first readings. I have a lot of highlights and underlines in that one! In fact, I went back through after reading your reply and found my note in my copy for lines 1025-1052 that begins with Lucretius encouraging us to consider reciting those lines from time to time. I take him to mean recitation of all those lines up to 1052 since that includes remembering that even Epicurus died, too. That recitation could constitute one facet of a daily Epicurean practice.

What intrigued me about this Buddhist Mindfulness of Death was seeing it in relation to the Epicurean proclivity for the creation of epitomes and summaries so that we may "practice these and similar things day and night." I saw this item from "enemy territory" as a possible "similar thing." That phrase ("practice these things...") from the Letter to Menoikos, the letter itself being a summary of the teachings, uses the word μελέτα (which Latin translates as meditatio as in Meditatio mortem) where the translation uses "practice." I'm a big proponent of going back to original sources. Dig into the original texts and work forward instead of relying solely on interpreters. In fact, the exact same words - ταῦτα μελέτα - are used in both Menoikos and in I Timothy 4:15-16 which Bible translations render as "Be diligent in these things", "Meditate upon these things", "Practice and work hard on these things", "Remember these things and think about them", and even "Put these things into practice." All of these would be applicable to the ταῦτα μελέτα in Menoikos. Choosing Epicurean summaries, snippets, epitomes, and recitations upon which to "μελέτα," meditate, reflect, remember, and practice strike me as a good basis for a daily practice.

So, just to be clear, I would never recommend that the specifically Buddhist Mindfulness of Death replace reflection on epitomes or readings of Epicurus and Lucretius. What I am suggesting or proposing is that this Buddhist practice could serve as inspiration for an Epicurean one. Using all remedies at their disposal to crack open the hard shell of their own or someone else's fear of death and reluctance to affirm the *fact* of the dissolution of the body into its constituent parts that have no feeling, one could use a systematic remembering of what happens to the body after death to acclimate to that reality. I would contend that this kind of thinking on death would be no more Buddhist than that the Premeditatio Malorum belongs to the Stoics. Cicero traces that back to Euripides in Tusculan Disputations, Book 3. From my reading, both the Stoics and Epicureans have some version of thinking about worst case scenarios to prepare for them, and that idea was simply rolling around in Greek culture since Euripides 150 years before Epicurus and Zeno. Likewise, there were plenty of dead bodies available to ancient Greeks to serve as memento mori in their practice "both night and day" of the finality of death and a reminder of the preciousness of life. I, of course, can't say they *did* this, and lack of evidence can't be used to say "well, they might have." It's frustrating that SO

much of Epicurus' work - not to mention Metrodorus' and all the others' - is lost. But I don't think there's anything per se precluding the development of an Epicurean practice of some such exercise as long as it's not caught up with Buddhist trappings of karma, rebirth, and similar superstitions. DRN VI from line 1250 to the end includes a vivid picture of dead bodies. Coupling a recitation of those lines while putting-before-the-eyes a mental visualization of the scene itself *could* be a powerful exercise.