

Meditare mortem & Mindfulness of Death

Post by "Don" of February 29, 2020 at 1:30 AM

Let me state emphatically first of all that Epicureans are *not* Buddhists. However, to paraphrase Seneca, there's nothing wrong with crossing "into the enemy's camp - not as a deserter, but as a scout." Seneca is well known for favorably quoting Epicurus, but Seneca was definitely no Epicurean. Likewise, we are not Buddhists, but if there is a Buddhist concept or technique that might prove useful, I believe it is at least worth exploring.

First, please allow me to set the stage by quoting several passages with which we're all familiar on the importance of understanding that [death is nothing to us](#):

KD 2: [Death is nothing to us](#), for **that which is dissolved into its elements is without consciousness**, and that which is without consciousness is nothing to us.

KD 11: If our suspicions about astronomical phenomena and about death were nothing to us and troubled us not at all, and if this were also the case regarding our ignorance about the limits of our pains and desires, then we would have no need for studying what is natural.

Letter to Menoikos: **Become accustomed yourself** to hold that for us death is nothing, for all good and evil are in consciousness; and **death is the deprivation of consciousness**.

And, finally, Seneca who, quoting Epicurus in Letter 26, states that one should "**Meditare mortem**" or "Think/meditate on death."

So, having a deep, unshakable understanding that death is the end of consciousness, that death dissolves us down to our elements and does away with all feeling, is a requirement to dispel the fear of death. But although Epicurus states that this knowledge will result in dispelling our fear, he doesn't provide a way to get there. There's no path laid out to get to that unshakable knowledge. (Note that I'm not using the word "belief." It's not a "belief" in the colloquial way of understanding that. It is a knowledge of reality.) How can we gain this and make it firm in our minds?

Well, I was recently listening to episode #218 "The Profound Upside of Mortality" of the 10% Happier podcast <https://www.tenpercent.com/podcast/> where Nikki Mirghafori was talking about, among other things, the Buddhist practice of Mindfulness of Death. I didn't know this woman but I was intrigued by the title. I initially didn't expect to be drawn in, but the more I listened, the more intrigued I became. The Mindfulness of Death practice wasn't mystical. It wasn't supernatural. It was very down-to-earth. It was a concrete way of confronting the reality of death, what it means to be dead, and how you can use it to learn to accept death as a fact of life and to become aware of the preciousness of the life you're living. This struck me as very Epicurean-sounding, which surprised me.

The Buddhist term is Maraṇasati and [Wikipedia gives a surprisingly cogent summary of the techniques](#). The visualizations reminded me of Philodemus' description of the Epicurean practice of setting-before-the-eyes used for therapeutic purposes of combatting the vices of arrogance, anger, etc. An Epicurean variation on this Buddhist practice *could* be a way of setting-before-the-eyes the reality of the finality of death, the dissolution of our atoms, and the preciousness of life.

I share this as a way of engendering discussion in this sub-forum. Let the frank speech begin!

