

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!



Post by “Cassius” of February 29, 2020 at 3:00 AM

I am not familiar with the details beyond what I read at that link, and I am always wary of being in enemy territory, simply because it is enemy territory and all kinds of dangers should be expected to be lurking, especially in the land of an enemy that has to have such a profound difference with us as to the ultimate meaning and goals of life.

But having said that, I am sure that it can only be a good thing to "think about death" and so calling it to mind in a variety of ways should be nothing but helpful. As to meditation I just don't have much expertise to allow me to comment.

However I would say something in response to this:

[Quote from Eugenios](#)

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.

I think if Epicurus / Lucretius were here to respond to that, they would say that they DID set out that path, and that path is the study of nature as laid out in the sequence of observations/studies left to us in Lucretius Book 1 and 2 up to and through the discussion of how the soul is material and dissipates at death.

I would say that that understanding is the only true path to an unshakeable confidence that death is truly nothing to us, and if we do not in fact make that chain observation / deduction for ourselves, embracing the evidence and the reasoning behind us, then no amount of mental visualization or contemplation is ever going to be truly successful in giving us confidence that there is nothing to fear in 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.

Post by “Cassius” of February 29, 2020 at 11:40 AM

Good points Eugenios. As a technical aside, I see that you are probably pasting your text into the post from an outside program, and so it is coming through in a slightly different font. There's no problem with that at all, but that method brings in a fixed font style, and I find sometimes when people change themes for the site that a fixed font can cause issues, so I will go in and fix that. If you see what I mean, you can fix that yourself in the future by blocking your text in the input box and selecting the "font family" option, and you'll see that the last option is "remove" -- and that returns it to normal text.

You have such strong detail in your writing that I want everyone to be able to see it!

Edit -- I made the change, and I see that in order to revert to standard I had to do the same thing with the "font size" option too. I hope the final result looks ok to you.

Post by “Don” of February 29, 2020 at 1:05 PM

Thank you so much for the tips on posting! I do wish to be a good Friend. I tried the removals on this post (both font and size) as an experiment and can see the difference.

Post by “Godfrey” of February 29, 2020 at 9:23 PM

This is an intriguing topic.... I personally discovered Epicurus while pursuing Stoicism, and for quite some time was searching for Epicurean "spiritual exercises" along the lines of some of the Stoic practices. I also spent a number of years sitting with my neighborhood Zen group, which encouraged formal practice.

Currently I've abandoned all of these. I'm finding much more pleasure and fulfillment in studying nature, science, some philosophy, some history.... The joy of this, for me, is in learning more about the world and my place in it. And interestingly, it all started through studying Epicurus: how his philosophy relates to other philosophies, to science, to history. Epicurus mentioned in the letter to Herodotus that he got great pleasure from his study of natural philosophy (I paraphrase) and I'm finding that to be true for me.

Regarding death, I'm finding that there's no fear there. It's a fact of life; the more I see the bigger scientific and historical picture, the less there is to fear in death. Not that I'm looking forward to it!

But Eugenios your post is intriguing. It would be interesting to know more about various Epicurean practices. I think many of them probably pertained to life in the garden, while those of us today don't have such a community and have (I imagine) a wide variety of life and work circumstances in which we study and practice. People have posted in other threads about types of daily practices they follow; I'm not aware of anyone following a mindfulness of death practice however.

Post by "Don" of March 1, 2020 at 5:29 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

I personally discovered Epicurus while pursuing Stoicism, and for quite some time was searching for Epicurean "spiritual exercises" along the lines of some of the Stoic practices....

I, too, discovered Epicurus by way of the Stoics... basically because they've gotten WAY more publicity and promotion - both historically (since the Christians found them palatable enough to incorporate into their theology along with Plato) and in modern times. I still would be interested to see some Epicurean "spiritual exercises" which is why I've found Hadot interesting. Tsouna's *The Ethics of Philodemus* has also been interesting for this reason. But I also think your study of nature is as valid as any exercise as any. 😊

I'm going to have to find those posts of daily practices, too!

And just to be clear: I haven't personally started an Epicurean Mindfulness of Death practice. I'm intrigued by the idea and will keep the forum updated if I do but so far I haven't tried it.

Post by “Hiram” of March 3, 2020 at 7:59 AM

[Quote from Eugenios](#)

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.

Nice to meet you here!

I don't remember Philodemus applying "seeing before the eyes" to death, although maybe he did, but his scroll On Death is in my view the most important and valuable in Herculaneum.

<http://societyofepicurus.com/reasonings-abo...demus-on-death/>

I DO wish to point you in the direction of the closing portion of Lucretius' On the Nature of Things. There, Lucretius carries out a somewhat morbid meditation on death that is reminiscent of the Buddhist and Hindu Tantric practices related to acceptance of death by witnessing it.

This portion recently inspired a blog by a Unitarian minister:

<http://andrewjbrown.blogspot.com/2020/02/learni...-shadow-of.html>

where he argues that it's important to adopt Epicurean doctrine about death rather than say "all views must be respected", so as to protect our minds from religious people who exploit our existential vulnerabilities during an epidemic or a crisis. Philodemus DID say something similar to this in Peri Parrhesias, something along the lines of "*Men who are charlatans, too, divert many, **seizing them after some stress** and enchanting them with their subtle kindness.*"

Post by “Joshua” of March 5, 2020 at 1:35 PM

Hello,

all



It's been a time, but I still have an eye here—and a voice that I don't use enough!

Some may recall that I came to the Epicurean way through Buddhism. Indeed, I have used the Meditation on Death myself. Here's what I have to say;

To hear modern Buddhists speak of the Meditation on Death is generally to hear them mischaracterize it. I confess to not having listened to the linked podcast, Eugenios, but I want to clarify the point. What a Buddhist meditates on is precisely the death of the body. It's good so far as that goes—but before you get very far into it, you arrive at the problem.

The problem is that the deep, underlying structure of Buddhism *precludes* the possibility of genuine death. In fact, that's rather the whole point. They meditate on death in order to **dismiss the claims of the body** (which really does die) and focus all their earthly energy on the mind or spirit. How do I know this? Because; if Buddhists genuinely believed that death meant extinction, then death would encompass their definition of nibbana. And are we to believe that the shortest road thither is to kill one's self? Obviously not. And so we may discern that when the early buddhists spoke of rebirth, they meant it literally. The idea that rebirth is metaphorical, or poetic, or only by analogy, is a modern fiction.

What Thomas Jefferson said of the trinity is equally true of rebirth; An idea must be distinct before reason can act upon it, and no one ever had a distinct idea of rebirth, or of nirvana.

As an Epicurean, what do I think of all this?

First: that the claims of the body are not to be dismissed or denied, but are wholly justified, in and of themselves. I believe this because pleasure is the self-evident good.

Second: there *is* a sense of urgency in the shortness of human life, but it's source is altogether different from an Epicurean viewpoint. The Pali Canon teaches that nirvana is only possible in a human rebirth, and that a human rebirth is as rare as a sea turtle surfacing inside a golden ring in the middle of the ocean. A buddhist better get it right in this life or they'll surf through the six realms of existence waiting for another chance. The urgency for an Epicurean, by contrast, is that one will squander his only life in pain and suffering because he hasn't learned how to optimize for pleasure effectively.

Third: that there *is* certainly value in reflecting on death. Specifically; we should do as Epicurus instructed, and reflect on how [Death is Nothing to us!](#)

Well, I have to go back to work...it's an excellent topic though!

Josh

Post by “Joshua” of March 5, 2020 at 1:46 PM

The Buddhist reflects on death in order to escape the mortal world.

An Epicurean reflects on death in order to, in the words of W. H. Auden, "Find the mortal world enough."

Post by “Cassius” of March 6, 2020 at 2:55 AM

Youve been away too long but those are two great posts - thank you!

Post by “Joshua” of March 6, 2020 at 10:47 AM

It has been too long, Cassius!

The meditation on death has still a further use; that of overcoming lust or longing. The idea is to visualize the person to whom you are attached, and to "watch" them (in your mind) go through the various stages of sickness, aging, death, decay, and finally decomposition.

Whatever there may be gained by way of perspective in all of this, I can't see the pleasure in it—and I have an indistinct dislike for the morbidities involved. This was the version of death-meditation I employed myself.

Didn't work.

And upon reflection, I'm saddened to think I hoped for it.

Post by “Don” of March 6, 2020 at 4:03 PM

Powerful posts, [Joshua](#) . Thank you very much for those insights, especially the Auden quote.

One of my incentives for posting this thread was to get a conversation going on what it means for an Epicurean to "meditare mortem" as Epicurus urged us (via Seneca at least), and I've been pleased with everyone's passion and insights.

I fully agree that Buddhists and Epicureans come at this from two diametrically opposed sides, and you did an excellent job in summarizing that difference. Your brief notes on the Buddhist view of a human existence was spot on! It's merely the best vehicle for getting out of the cycle of rebirth. That isn't even in the same realm as Epicurus!

And an Epicurean meditation, reflection, or practice (choose your translation of meditatio or μελέτη) of death would not necessarily include the visualizations of dead bodies, one's own or others, but it could. That's nature! There's nothing intrinsically morbid about it - only culturally. I would recommend anyone look into the "death positive" and "green burial" movement especially [Caitlin Doughty's work](#). I've found it fascinating and eye-opening recently.

From my perspective then, what should I get from engaging in "Meditare mortem" as an Epicurean?

- By meditating on my own death, I should come to an unshakeable understanding of the briefness of my life and the necessity of pursuing pleasure now and remembering past pleasures while I can.
- By meditating on the death and eventual decomposition of my body, I should come to a visceral understanding that I am not separate from these arrangements of atoms and, when I die, that arrangement goes away. I no longer exist and therefore death is nothing to me.
- By meditating on the death of friends and loved ones, I should firmly grasp the reality that everyone's life is brief and we get only one chance to show those closest to us how we love and appreciate them. We have no assurance that when we part from someone (as in going to work or leaving the house) we will see them again, we should be mindful of leaving pleasantly.

That last one contrasts starkly with the Stoic reflection on death which has the potential to engender a detachment... Although it doesn't need to. I've seen Stoic articles reflect similar sentiments to the one above, but I didn't really but it entirely from them.

None of this is necessarily easy and in some respects may be painful at first. But, from my perspective, it falls into the "experiencing a pain now for long-term pleasure in the future" practice.

Post by "Joshua" of March 6, 2020 at 4:11 PM

That is all to the good, Eugenios! Another good practice, which I have occasionally employed; try to visualize the field of void and matter that stretches away from you in every direction as you stand, for example, in a quiet wood, or a crowded and busy intersection. See if it is not suggestive to you in a similar vein!

Post by “Don” of March 6, 2020 at 5:44 PM

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

Another good practice, which I have occasionally employed; try to visualize the field of void and matter that stretches away from you in every direction as you stand, for example, in a quiet wood, or a crowded and busy intersection.

I like that! I can see how it would put things into perspective.

Post by “Godfrey” of March 6, 2020 at 9:17 PM

A more pleasant practice, aside from Josh's, is semi-regular viewing of the movie Harold and Maude. I haven't watched it in a long, long time though so I'm not aware of where it falls on the philosophical spectrum.

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harold_and_Maude

Post by “Don” of March 6, 2020 at 9:42 PM

[Quote from Godfrey](#)

A more pleasant practice, aside from Josh's, is semi-regular viewing of the movie Harold and Maude. I haven't watched it in a long, long time though so I'm not aware of where it falls on the philosophical spectrum.

I know of that film but never had the opportunity to watch it. I'll admit that after reading the synopsis on Wikipedia, I'm intrigued. Thanks for the recommendation!

Post by “Godfrey” of March 6, 2020 at 9:53 PM

You're welcome! After reading that wiki page, I'm thinking that I might watch it again. This time for any philosophical tidbits in addition to the oddball black humor.