

Thinking About Death - Preparation for Death and Dealing With Death of Loved Ones

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

[ADMIN NOTE: The first several posts here were copied from a thread about Buddhism, but they focus on the issue of death and they belong here too, as they are a good way to start the discussion of dealing with death of loved ones.]

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 “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 μελετά) 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 "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 “Martin” of November 9, 2022 at 12:44 PM

In order to die as we lived in pleasure, we should avoid taking pain killers because practicing pain management by mental methods prepares us for a still mostly pleasurable experience when we suffer a painful death.

Just before death, we may be very confused. Therefore, we should practice focusing on pleasure at times when we are confused (preferably mental pleasures to avoid accidents in that state of confusion) such that we can assure pleasure to the end when we die.

Post by “Kalosyni” of March 13, 2023 at 3:15 PM

In Letter to Menoeceus, it says:

"...train yourself to hold that [death is nothing to us](#), because good and evil consist in sensation, and death is the removal of sensation. A correct understanding that [death is nothing to us](#) makes the mortality of life enjoyable — not because it gives you an unbounded span of time, but because it removes the desire for immortality. There is nothing terrifying in life to someone who truly understands that there is nothing terrifying in the absence of life."

[Joshua](#) brought up during the last podcast the phrase "accustom yourself" to hold that [death is nothing to us](#) -- and that can be contemplating that the dying process is a natural process. And we have modern medicine now to help with the process.

Here is a very good article about the process of dying -- death due to incurable illness in old age.

Quote

It's hard to ask your doctor what dying will be like. Death is a reality everyone will face one way or another. If you have an incurable illness,

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1899-thinking-about-death-preparation-for-death-and-dealing-with-death-of-loved-ones/>

knowing what to expect as your body shuts down helps you prepare for as "good" of death as possible.

<https://healthnews.com/family-health/end-of-life-care/what-is-dying-like-a-nurse-explains-what-dying-bodies-do/>

I think it is important to contemplate this, and to let this be motivating toward living a full and pleasurable life.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1899-thinking-about-death-preparation-for-death-and-dealing-with-death-of-loved-ones/>