

Motivation

We are going to start with adjusting our motivation. It is very important to state your aspiration, to have the bigger picture. Free of suffering for ourselves is the first step. But you have to fill your cup, so it overflows, for all other beings – human, animal, insect. The bigger view is ‘may I awaken speedily for the sake of all beings’. Spend a moment to touch on this aspiration for yourself, find your own sentient feeling for this. The practice doesn’t ‘dead end’ at yourself, it doesn’t stop just with me. If you allow the practice to stop just for yourself, you are going to become quickly bored, lose interest. If you are losing interest, maybe you are not sufficiently focused on others. Just having the aspiration is enough, focusing on others is enough, but you have to state it in your mind, to have the intention. Check from time to time throughout the day if you have this aspiration alive in your mind, or are you just going through the motions. Mind is the most important aspect, so checking your intention is important. When the going gets tough, make it your practice to support other beings, so your life is for, is of service to, other beings, of value to other beings. When you have an illness, an emotional upset, being aware of having this will make you more able to help other beings. You should welcome suffering, pain; you are going to become so wise, so compassionate – it is true!

Listen with the divine ear to the texts:

With the heartfelt desire and determination to attain enlightenment for the welfare of all living beings, who are more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel for accomplishing the supreme goal, may I always cherish them and hold them dear.

Commentary

Cherishing and caring for others is the source of all happiness. Cherishing ourselves above others is the source of all suffering and negative conditions in this world. Therefore, our determination to attain enlightenment should always be motivated by our heart-felt desire to serve the welfare of all living beings. The attainment of enlightenment is the supreme goal. Our enlightenment comes from the cultivation of bodhicitta (the awakening mind of love, compassion, and wisdom). Bodhicitta arises from our deepest compassion. To develop this compassion and reach the supreme goal, we need others. In this way, all living beings are the principle source for our spiritual development and for accomplishing the supreme goal of enlightenment. In addition, at some time each of us has been, and will be, a source of great kindness and benefit for one another. The immense kindness of all living beings is integral to our own human existence. Considering this, we can understand how living beings are even more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel and that we should always cherish them and hold them dear.

I want to talk to you about *bodhicitta*. The word *bodhi* means purified. What do you think that means, what do we need to purify? What are the three poisons? Attachment, aversion, and confusion; or another wording, desire, hatred and delusion. So *bodhicitta* is the mind that is seeking to purify itself. And how do you do that? By paying attention to others, by serving others, putting others before you. There is a text: ‘May I serve to be perfect, may I be perfect to serve’. This would be the *bodhicitta*; *citta* means the mind. So this is the heartfelt desire, the drive to serve other beings. So we talk about cultivating *bodhicitta*, cultivating the mind of serving, of benefitting others. There are two levels of *bodhicitta*; mundane or relative, this is the level at which we operate. This is the kindness that you display every day. It is also the aspiration to offer any piece of

happiness you have to the benefit of others. So I would like to ask you today, as part of your motivation, to reflect on your action and ask yourself ‘how is this benefiting other beings?’. ‘How are my actions in body, speech and mind benefiting other beings?’ It is an on-going contemplation. So you begin to train your mind to cherishing others, rather than for yourself. From ‘I want enlightenment’, to wishing enlightenment for others first. It can be at the same time, of course; when you say ‘all beings’ that includes yourself. So when we talk about cultivating, it is to train your mind. This is about motivation, instead of thinking about yourself, think of others first – with eating, choosing a seat. Instead of thinking ‘what can I get’, you train the mind. The movement of cherishing the others first. Giving to others is the way of filling yourself up.

Contemplation of interbeing

The *parami* of *dana*, generosity: look at it as an opening, a letting go. To be more open and generous of mind, heart, body to all beings – not just loved ones, ones in authority, ones you hope to get something from. To all beings – why do we have to be generous and helpful to all? Contemplate how essential other beings are to you for survival in this life, you are totally dependent on other beings, we can do nothing on our own.

This is it INTERBEING

There is a cloud floating on this sheet of paper that you are holding in your hand. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper.

The cloud is essential for the paper to exist.

If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either;

So the cloud and the paper inter-are.

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine.

And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper;

the paper and the sunshine inter-are.

And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger’s father and mother are in it too.

Looking even more deeply, we can see that we are in it too, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception.

So everything is in this sheet of paper. You cannot point out one thing that is not there – time, space, the Earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat.

Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper.

‘To be’ is ‘to inter-be’. You cannot just be by yourself, alone.

This sheet of paper is, because everything else is. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything else in the universe within it.

Thich Nhat Hanh

From *Resurgence* No. 241, March-April 2007

Purification – to be really purified we have to look at the practice of generosity. Letting go of the unwholesome in body, speech and mind and cultivating the wholesome, the first virtue we have to focus on is the *parami* of *dana*. Step into the Zendo – have intention to practise for the benefit of all beings, not just for self, to get out of trouble. All beings too much? Think of all beings living at

the Orchard –including birds, cats.... Dreariness, exhaustion will vanish at a flash because you are opening the heart, not just focusing on ‘me’. You have to set the condition before you step into the Zendo. Feel that you are nurturing this being so that you can help all sentient beings. Just this feeling fills you with energy. We are receiving a massive amount all the time, the product of so much input, attention. It is your responsibility, duty to pass it on. Your practice will never flourish if it is just including you. If you really develop generosity towards other beings, you will really receive from others beyond your imagination, in ways you could not have foreseen.

Every action you make, even private thoughts, has impact on all beings. This is motivation to practise: because you are dependent on all beings – have been, will be, forever. Take an event in your life that is still influencing you, still active in your life now, and try to find all the people that have in some way helped to bring about that event for you. The cushion of *chi* behind your back is all these beings that are supporting you, and you are taking them all with you. See the enormity of how you cannot do something just on your own. And *vice versa*, how you can make an impact on the lives of others. The purpose of this contemplation is to feel over-whelmed: you cannot do anything just by yourself, you owe to countless numbers of others so why not practise for their benefit? Catch the mind when you are doing something just for you – can you open up? Mind can use contemplation to move us further, mind is not an enemy. Every time you come into the Zendo, adjust your motivation - you come to practise for the benefit of numberless beings. If you step into the Zendo without having checked motivation, give yourself permission to step out again and do it.

The second level of *bodhicitta* is how you vow to attain enlightenment in order to help other beings better. This is the ultimate level. You have to go to the first level first in order to go to the ultimate level. If you serve you are already perfect: the text, ‘may I serve to be perfect, may I be perfect to serve’. I want it to be very practical – so, your homework is ‘how can I benefit other beings?’. How my actions can support other beings in body, in speech and in mind. It is asking you to turn your view to others first. This is how you are learning to purify your mind.

Circle of Support Exercise

Think of an event in your life, or a skill, and think of all the beings that were involved in taking you there. So I suggest you make a circle on a big piece of paper. Make a small circle in the centre; the small circle is an event, a skill, and you think back to all the people involved, all the beings, all the immense kindness – it goes on and on and on and on... At first you think of people you know, then of people you don’t know. Write down just the names of the people, put them anywhere in the circle. *Does that go pre-birth?* It can do. It is an exercise to train the mind to realise that each moment is supported by many, many beings.

You make your mind bigger, expand your mind so you see how you are supported; recognise that your human existence is dependent on the kindness of others. Also think about how all of us being here is benefiting others. You think about this; if you take a walk after lunch, you think ‘how is this benefiting others?’. You think about all the sentient beings, all life. Namgyal Rinpoche used to say ‘the highest thought is how can I benefit another being?’. So this is turning you inside out, I feel, isn’t it? *It’s a tall order.* Yes, that is why I used the words ‘adjusting the motivation’. *So when a selfish thought arises, how do you deal with it?* For the moment, when grasping arises you notice it and soften; say ‘hi, you are back!’, ‘I know you!’, give it space, don’t strangle it. Even your negative emotions can benefit others. If you know how to deal with a negative emotion, you are able to help others do that also. There is a positive to you experiencing a negative emotion; so you can say ‘goody, I have a challenge here!’.

Now choose an event that is easy, not too difficult, and let your mind make associations with the people involved. Make a second circle of the same event if you don't have enough room. Remember we are training the mind, cultivating the mind, it is not about success or failure. Don't feel discouraged - we are cultivating, we are taking care, and it takes time. Cultivating means tending, caring for, finding what it needs to grow. The journey of making the aspiration to support all beings is the point of this exercise.

Contemplations on the Human Condition

Contemplations are a tool for training the mind, turning the mind to awakening, to *dharma*, to wholesome thoughts. Ponder on the text, ask yourself questions – this is making a connection with it. Using the ability of mind in a focused way.

Four thoughts that turn the mind to the *Dharma*

The preciousness of human birth

*A favourable human birth, with its potential and leisures, is rare and difficult to obtain,
yet easily lost.*

Its attainment is much more meaningful than that of a wish-fulfilling gem.

*If we do not use this opportunity to practice now, then all will be
senselessly wasted.*

What is meant by a 'favourable human birth?' Consider the conditions that are needed to follow *dharma*, for example to be on this workshop? How many human beings have the leisure and resources to meet a teacher, to do any practice? How many humans have heard of *dharma* and are putting it into practice; cultivating compassion, loving-kindness rather than greed and aggression? In some countries women have no possibility of doing this practice (nor following any religion). Contemplating this gives an incentive to spend more time in pursuit of the practice. Look at what potential and leisures humans have compared with animals. The potential may be there (in humans for example to learn about the *dharma*) but also with constraints such as patriarchy, poverty, family circumstances. And consider what it would be like being a dog or a cat for a day? 'To attain' this precious existence – concentrate on present rather than past *karma*. Consider the favourable conditions in your past life that moved you on towards what, where, you are now. Where did the skills, qualities come from?

Make a mandala on a big piece of paper and explore what the contemplation means for you – for example 'favourable', 'potential', 'leisure'. Explore the influences in your life, and how you understand the favourable conditions you have had so far. This touches on the highest attainment in life: the highest, most precious gift is to meet the teaching because it gives all the tools, ways, 'skill and means', to practise and become free from suffering; and to cultivate loving kindness, joy, equanimity. Sometimes you feel that, other times other things feel more precious. And when you do your motivation at the beginning of the day – 'how can I help other beings?' – giving food, meeting needs, is precious, but limited. The teaching leading to equanimity, to full awakening, is the most precious means of helping others. Only humans can attain this, and it is rare because there are few humans compared to other sentient beings. Dig a hole in the earth outside and see how many creatures are in it, compared with humans in this room.

We humans have the potential to come to full awakening and to help other beings. Among family and friends, how many are involved in, are open to the practice? And think of other humans who don't have the conditions – leisure, mental capacity, availability of a teacher – to practise. Recollect the beings that have inspired you to not give up on this precious human birth and on the practice, to strengthen your resolve. Explore the connection with this contemplation, to persevere with it, not give up; through a mandala – it is analytical meditation. When you do this mental journey you will come to a place naturally of readiness to help other beings. It is fuel to support you to practise. If you meet resistance, frustration, rebellion, guilt, the feeling of 'why me?' – be upright, gentle and tender with it. There is a lot of energy in that resistance – listen to it but don't give it more weight, don't pull away from it, and see what happens when that energy is released. We have to learn to meet our stories, our attitudes, weaknesses, defilements, with uprightness, gentleness, tenderness. It seems overwhelming, but take it in each moment. Can I continue? – there is no choice. Keep exploring it, and the seed of awakening will come out, the *bodhicitta* 'yes, this is what I want to do with my life'. With the mandala, make it personal – it is about you, your potential and your leisures. Walking around this village where we live I became aware that in each family, among neighbours, there was suffering – cancer, depression, suicides, bankruptcy. In the face of deep suffering you have to be stronger, be upright, dig deep into the practice. There is a way, the teaching is very compassionate. We have to make our practice more stable, so we can rely on it in times of difficulty. We don't know when tragedy, big disturbance, suffering is going to happen – our practice has to be strong so we don't get overwhelmed when it comes suddenly.

Death and impermanence

All compounded existence is impermanent, flashing like lightning. Everything that comes into being is certain to pass away: the universe as outer aspect (context) and sentient beings as the inner (content). One day I too will die and there is no way to know exactly when; it could be years from now, it could be today. May I always bear in mind impermanence and death and live each moment fully in bright, non-clinging awareness.

For contemplating impermanence, find an open space outside in nature, set yourself in front of a view, and notice the changes taking place in that space – the passing movement of clouds, the changing movements of trees, of creatures passing by. Watching the movement of change in the outer, for fifteen minutes. Then practise the same witnessing, observation of the many thoughts that pass through your head, like the clouds. And looking at changes taking place within you, the inner – in terms of posture, sensation, the body, feeling. Or go for a long walk and everything you see, notice the impermanence of it. Come back from the walk and realise you are different, you are changed from the person, from how you were when you set off – notice in what ways. As there is a letting go, there is creating room for something to come in. Emptying and forming. When you let go, there is room for something to arise in the self. The process of letting go is also allowing in. Do you want more love? – let go to let it in.

Focus again on impermanence. Especially in times of illness, the process of dying is going on all the time. There are signs of change. Study the signs of decay in your body and mind. Be honest. In walking meditation, say one word in *Pali* with each step: *atthi* (bones), *mansam* (flesh and vital organs), *taco* (pronounced tajo - skin). Walking seventeen measured paces, say the three words step by step, then in reverse. Briefly imagining all or just some of your skeleton; your flesh, muscles and innards; then just a bag of skin. At the end of seventeen paces pause (not too long), turn (not too slow), pause and look at the path you have just come from, and begin again. Over thirty minutes.

This meditation on the body is loosening the sense of self. Then spend some time contemplating impermanence.

Mahana (pronounced marana) is death; from impermanence onto death. Recollect people you know who have died, from illness, accident, or someone with whom you have a special connection such as teachers. Recollect how they died, when; how swift, how expected it was; how old they were. Even the greatest teachers die; we postpone things, we are deceiving ourselves by assuming continuation, permanence. We need to respond and change priorities, things and people which are no longer conducive in your life will fall away, so let them go; you must practise now, to be prepared. Come to it from a place of urgency. To be ready, purifying our state of being. Mind is what carries you over at the time of death. Stay in a state of loving-kindness, non-clinging awareness, for self and others. Try to fall asleep tonight in a state of loving-kindness.

Karma, cause and effect

If we want to know our past, we only need to look at how we are now, we are the product of what we have practised. If we want to know our future, we only need to look at what we are practising now; all that happens has results, it matters what we do. Recognising this, may I ever be watchful how my body (actions), speech (what I say) and mind (thoughts) shape this moment and the next.

Karma (Sanskrit) or *kamma* (Pali) literally means action or activity which is caused by wholesome or unwholesome volition. These actions of body, speech and mind that we perform every day shape the entirety of our life be it our environment, our occupations and our relationships. This is very positive, having greater awareness of the actions of body, speech and mind, of what is wholesome and unwholesome, not the western connotations of good and bad. It is about conducive circumstances, conditions for growth, in your environment, people you associate with, and occupation. What supports the positive and what doesn't. You are invited to practise more selflessness, instead of the unwholesome actions of body, speech and mind which are about generating harm for other beings, are all to do with taking from others. We need mindfulness, to check our motivation. The whole of this third contemplation is about being more selfless, more caring for other beings – 'may all beings be well and happy'. Look at the wholesome seeds in your life and how they were watered, and the beings that helped you to water them.

Karma comes down to watching the mind, and what is wholesome and unwholesome. The wholesome is any activity of body, speech and mind which allows space to grow, playfulness. There are some objects – people, environment, activity – which support growing in you. There is a context of impermanence – what was wholesome in one time of life may not be later on, impermanence. Review your life – is this still wholesome, still supporting your growing, awakening? Sometimes we feel loyalty to what was so supportive but no longer is – we need to catch up with this, to let it go. The unwholesome is something that blocks your growing. An illness can be wholesome – it makes you stop, look at your life, what changes are to be made? Don't just look at standard positives and negatives, that can be limiting. Is this aspect supporting my growing? Is it wholesome or unwholesome now? Being aware of how your body, speech and mind shape this moment and the next. *Karma* is not predestined, it is changeable, exhaustible, can be changed. It comes down to intention – an action may appear wonderful but the intention was not so good. Where is the action coming from, what is the intention? The Buddha's example – a poor old woman who had nothing, she put her dirty sandals on the altar. The head monk said 'not on the altar!' The Buddha said 'no, she has given all that she has'. Read your own mind, where you are

coming from as you are acting, speaking. Adjust your motivation. We have to first be in a better position ourselves, but that is not enough; it has to overflow to other beings. Whatever good you have, whatever wholesome state – share it. Countless numbers of beings in the past and the present are supportive of your actions now. Have the image of a cushion supporting the back – behind you are all the beings in the past and now who have practised, and us together in the Zendo, it is a big refuge. Take refuge in this sharing and back-up; if you adopt what is said in ‘taking refuge’ your life will change because you are supporting others, which is wholesome, and it is an aspect of giving, of emptying; and you will get more and more back. So think not ‘I meditate’, but that you are reading the mind, the intention behind every action. Even without any intention to hurt any sentient beings, be more watchful of how you are shaping yours and others’ environment because of your actions now. Whatever you are doing in everyday life, consider ‘could this action cause distress, harm, to another sentient being?’.

Suffering

It is not easy to endure the ever-changing circumstances in nature and in life. Getting what we don't want, wanting what we don't get, is suffering. We are easily seduced by the appearances of happiness which prove only fickle and ever elusive, yet in our blindness we remain attached. Recognising this, may I practise letting go and come to live more peacefully in the present moment.

There are three **kinds of suffering**, which together make up *samsara*, unsatisfactoriness

1. Suffering of misery, or the suffering of suffering, ‘*the ever-changing circumstances in nature and in life*’ – repetitive cyclic existence.
2. Suffering of change, ‘*we are easily seduced by the appearances of happiness which prove only fickle and ever elusive*’ – what starts off nice can turn not so, can become nasty. Love affairs go wrong.
3. Suffering of pervasive conditions: ‘The cause of suffering lies with our own unpurified aggregates’ – the five groupings of existence (*explained in the Insight chapter*). The impurities or ‘poisons’ are wanting (attachment), pushing away (aversion) and confusion.

Unsatisfactoriness breeds a sense of uneasiness, no peace; restlessness within, a deep sense of dissatisfaction. That is what takes people to the practice. ‘Renunciation of *samsara*’ really means to find a solution in the mind of enlightenment, *bodhicitta*, the drive for enlightenment. The deep internal unrest is good because it makes you search for the path to enlightenment. Through the *bodhisattva* vows: to reduce not just your suffering but that of all other beings; the cessation of suffering.

Nine Contemplations on Death

A retreat on dying: in our culture death is seen as a morbid subject to be denied or avoided. There is the sense of having failed, that this should not happen. Yet we know that one-day we too will pass away. Drawing from the nine contemplations on death and impermanence we will ‘practise dying’, letting go, loosening our grip on self and its many stories. Leaving fear behind we come to see that death and impermanence direct us to life, to living each moment with clear awareness and tenderness.

Allow the breathing to settle by itself, don't force anything, don't try to do anything. Make contact with the spine, imagine a beam of light or energy. Imagine this beam of light going deep into

the ground and high up into the sky. Imagine the spine as this beam of light. And so the spine is upright but relaxed, soft. And now gently rest the attention on the belly, noticing the movement as you breathe in and out. In the sitting there is only sitting, nothing else.

I have decided for today to ask you to focus on being gentle with yourself. Take the day to settle, to slow down to arrive in the situation. So no pushing, no forcing anything, just be gentle. If you cultivate gentleness you can go far deeper into the practice later on. Don't try to make yourself do things by forcing. And I want you to look back at your life over two years and to notice all the changes that have happened to you – in relationships, activity, environment. You may have some big headings like 'moving house', 'moving country', but you also have some smaller headings. So do that from time to time. Today you settle down, gather yourself, prepare yourself well. Tomorrow you start the nine contemplations on death. Are you ready to be in silence? I would like you to have a conducive support to go deep into your contemplation, so silence is very important. There are four aspects of the contemplation – the outer, the inner, the secret and the most secret. So first I give you a short text, with the outer. You make associations, connection; this leads you to inner experience. If you go deeper into the whole contemplation this brings you to the intuitive level, this is why you need to be more quiet. This leads you to the secret level, the more intuitive. And then something begins to shift.

So I would like to give you the rest of the day practising this, the order is as you wish. To be gentle, to settle down. Do some walking (not walking 'meditation') and to find a pace, wherever you are walking. To be in silence. Do some body work and to begin a review of your life over the past two years. Practise body work, walking, contemplating your life, and to create a sequence for yourself. The instruction is to begin to loosen up, to feel lighter. You can also chant for yourself the *metta* practice. I want you to come back very soft, very open, very melting, very at ease. Add to the dedication, *May all beings be well and happy and free from fear.*

A breathing exercise. Notice the end of the out-breath. If you want to practise dying, you want to practise being totally present at the end of the out-breath. Another instruction: to pay attention to being totally present at the end of each activity – leaving the Zendo, putting your coat on. Just be present, just being there at the end of the activity. At first do it with the obvious activity, then you see it at other times. It would be wonderful if, as you see the end of the activity, to mentally say 'emptying' – not holding, an emptying, not planning the next move. No need to plan. You have to take the step towards this experience. Eventually you have a thought, the end of the thought, emptying; no more, emptying. Falling in the gap basically. Do it with the movement of the body, the activity of the body, first, and then the mind later. This is what I mean by 'in the sitting there is just the sitting'; in the walking there is just the walking, in the eating there is just the eating, in the scratching there is just the scratching.

Today we begin with the first three contemplations.

FIRST CONTEMPLATION
All of us will die soon or later.
Death is inevitable; no-one is exempt.
Holding this thought in mind, I abide in breath.

First to go deeper into this contemplation, make a list of people you know, who were special to you, important to you, that have died. And recall their fame, their youth, their fortune, even if they were spiritually very advanced, they still die. The idea is to spend some time evoking those

associations. As you make your list you feel what it does in yourself, your response to it. At the moment we have an idea that we know about death; and the intention of this contemplation is to know death, to know it in your bones and yourself. For example we may have an idea that a famous teacher should not die and when it comes you feel ‘why him?’ ‘why her?’. So you spend some time reflecting on this in ourselves. Despite their quality, their goodness, they still die. You may think if you practise well you will not die, if I spend more time on my cushion I may die but not yet. *Just people you know?* No, people who are important to you, that you feel close to. So for example for British people it may be Princess Diana – so you reflect on who she was, what she had, and she still died.

You spend some time thinking about the contemplation, you make your list, and when you have exhausted this you do some walking practice, and then you go deeper. And the walking again is the pace that you had yesterday – is it helpful? *I find it changes.* Yes, I agree, so set a different pace - not slow, slow walk. When you start the contemplation, find a space that is conducive to being soft and focused, not too many distractions. Before you contemplate, focus on breathing, on the spine, as we do with sitting. Allow some space in your mind, to allow more space for thought to come through. You train your mind to stay with just one contemplation. You can imagine at some point your mind will get frightened and want to move on to something else. But you train the mind to come back. At the first stage the mind may be busy and then you do some walking practice and it becomes quieter and quieter. You decide the pace, the timing, I won’t give you a fixed time.

SECOND CONTEMPLATION

My life-span is ever decreasing.

The human life-span is ever decreasing, each breath brings us closer to death. Holding this thought in mind, I delve deeply into this truth.

You ‘know about’ it to be true, you need to know it is true, in your bones. So you need to spend some time contemplating this. The point is the movement towards the point of death cannot be stopped. So every thought, each day, each season, each action, each plan you have for the future – you think, oops! We are moving, galloping, towards this point. Relate it more to yourself. If you notice the changes in your body that have happened in the last year, since last week, since yesterday; make a list of changes in your body. So again you spend some time with the contemplation making associations, then you go into walking practice, it is very important to do the walking.

THIRD CONTEMPLATION

Death comes whether or not I am prepared.

*Death will indeed come, whether we are prepared or not.
Holding this thought in mind, I enter fully in the body of life.*

So you ask, what does it mean to be prepared? The most important thing is preparing the mind so I guess you need to reflect on what qualities you need to cultivate, and what is it you need to let go of? – in terms of tendencies, habits. It is said that at the moment of death what you have practised most will come through. So if in your life you have practised the anger, and been sometimes in loving-kindness, the anger will come through. If you are most of the time in loving-kindness and sometimes in anger, the loving-kindness will take you through. So it is most important to know that at the time of death, the vibration will come through. If most of your life you have practised sometimes generosity but mostly holding on, that is what will come. You need to know what you are practising now in your life, it is present sometime but how much, what is the percentage? There

is no certainty how we are going to die – it can be in a very confusing, a very traumatic state – so what you have practised will help you. *(to a student)* You are doing a lot of laughing. *I'm a little hysterical, I suppose it's a way of protecting myself.* I had an image of you being near the abyss and pretending it is not true. Every time I do this contemplation I find a lot of joy, there is a lot of joy in it. If at sometime you find the opposite, do something else. Take some time outside, watch the bird bathing itself in the fountain. Forget about it and then return. It is not meant to be a hardship, just to stay aware, take your time. And find a space that you enjoy being in to do the contemplation. *Is it OK to change the space for each one?* Exactly, sure, be spontaneous. You can go down to the river and do the practice there, it doesn't have to be in the Zendo. *It's scary, I've got such a lot of work to do to be the person I want to be before I die.* You need to plant the seed now. It is just changing the focus; the qualities you want, you have them already. It can grow very very fast in a positive sense, it doesn't have to take years and years and years. It can take years and years when you are young, but not now.

If something feels too much you leave it aside and return later. In a monastery this is what you do every day or so. If you start feeling upset, do something you feel happy with. And the nature is very good to be with – beautiful flowers, the birdsong. I want you to have enough energy to be able to attend to the contemplation so it is not the time to be spending the day upset. You are doing something very worthwhile, even if it is very emotional.

Feedback

- *I felt you gave me permission to be true to our spontaneity. When you are not pre-planning, there's a sense of noticing more, I was surprised.* The depth has to trust you, being soft, no expectation, not looking for results – then in that moment you go deep. When you are going to bed, doing the washing up, not necessarily in sitting.
- *When you are walking, I'm not sure of the difference between brooding and just holding the contemplation there.* You are not holding, just being aware, being in nature, and the intuitive level can come up. Otherwise you are too much on top of it, then you want to get rid of it by walking fast.
- *I wasn't consciously thinking of the contemplations while I was walking, but it's as if they were with me.* Of course they are with you, and they will come up. The texture of the mind, the quality of attention, you can read that in your walking. So if you can find a texture that is at ease then the mind will be quiet and calm. Keep an even mind, even pace, even attention.
- *Am I doing it right?* You have to ask yourself, don't compare. That is why I don't enforce the pace.
- *I don't get it, it's just words.* You are at the outer level now; outer, inner, intuitive and then the shift of awareness. The point of contemplation is just to do the work. The insight happens not necessarily at the time, it may happen later – when you are walking, when you are sleeping, in your dreams, then you make the connections.

Every time I do it (the contemplations) I experience joy, not just sometimes but every time. It is keeping the mind sharp, walking, letting it go deeper, then the shift of awareness comes, and joy in death. The point of doing these contemplations is to come to a shift of awareness.

In the sitting, try not to interfere with the breathing. If it is long, leave it as it is. If it is short, leave it as it is.

FOURTH CONTEMPLATION
My life-span is not fixed.

*Human life expectancy is uncertain; death can come at any time.
Holding this thought in mind I am attentive to each moment.*

We can fantasise about how much time we have left but we do not know, the timing is uncertain. So you think about people you know who died and ask yourself if they knew they would die that particular day. A son, someone I know, said ‘I’m going out now Mummy, will you still be around when I come back?’; she replied, ‘I don’t know’. She knew she was dying but she didn’t know when. *Some people do know, they know the day.* But not exactly, not the time of day – is it after breakfast, after lunch? The point of this contemplation is the timing is unknown. I would like you to create for yourself a short ritual that you do every day, once a day, that will remind you that death will come at any time. In order to appreciate every day of your life. It needs to be short, very brief, you can whisper in your ear, in each other’s ear: *momento mori*, remember the time of death. I give you the example of some Christian monks, their ritual is to say *momento mori*. The Pali word for death is *mahana*. But you create your own ritual.

FIFTH CONTEMPLATION

Death has many causes.

*There are many causes of death, even habits and desires are precipitants.
Holding this thought in mind, I consider the endless possibilities.*

What you have to do there – make a long, long list of all the possibilities of dying; how can one die, the causes. The manner, the possibilities in which someone can die. All this information is not new to you. What is new is that you have to go deeper, deep into it, to really appreciate the different possibilities, in this practice of death. You need to come to this shift of awareness.

SIXTH CONTEMPLATION

My body is fragile and vulnerable.

*The human body is fragile and vulnerable; my life hangs by a breath.
Holding this thought in mind, I attend as I inhale and exhale.*

So again you need to focus on the fragility of life, how it can be quickly taken away from you. And you can consider what happens after the out-breath if you cannot breathe in again. It takes us back to the practice we did the first day – to pay attention to the out-breath, the space at the end of the out-breath, and to pay attention to the breathing. *Is it best to die at the end of the out-breath?* Yes, do you remember the practice I have done with you, falling asleep with the out-breath? You could try that. When we sit the practice is just noticing the breathing. Just breathing, not making a story of this; the practice of breathing in, breathing out.

The same structure as yesterday – spend some time contemplating, then you do the walking practice. And try to stay with just the contemplation you are studying at the time. Not going back to other contemplations, not going into other stories, other associations. This way you will have a lot of clarity of thought.

Feedback

- *With the fifth contemplation, there were lots of pitfalls.* Pretty gruesome, eh? You need to consider all the possibilities – not in the Zendo surrounded by other students, chanting, beautiful flowers. You are going to meet your fantasies about how you want to die. You are not going to die like this. Some people die when the house falls on top of them. Every day in the news – for example, a nineteen year old boy dies, shot in the street.

- *Cycling in Berlin, I feel how fragile I am with all the cars. I knew two people who were killed cycling and yet I am still alive. Sometimes if I have this feeling I am very grateful that I am still alive. It is beautiful how you are doing this, you have to make this association again and again, going deeper.*
- *There is a parallel with giving birth, once you are pregnant there is no way out, it's inevitable. And breathing is what saw me through it, again it's like death.*
- *I am a midwife. Babies are still when they are born, not breathing, they seem lifeless; then suddenly they draw a first deep breath – and they're alive! So try to go deeper into this feeling, this thought is very important.*

It is a big challenge to live our life as if the moment is the only moment, it is the last one; each meeting, each sitting, it could be the last one.

SEVENTH CONTEMPLATION

My material resources will be of no use to me.

At the time of death, material resources are of no use.

Holding this thought in mind, I invest whole-heartedly in practice.

I think it would be good for you to contemplate your most precious thing, that you have to let go of it – art works, a *Buddha* statue, your exercise book. Anything that is precious. Imagine them being distributed to your family and friends, in a charity shop, a car boot sale. Imagine your precious *Buddha* statue in a charity shop, being used as a door-stop. My beautiful white *Buddha* in the Shiatsu room was a door-stop in a charity shop when I found it. All the time and money you have spent gathering these things. If you lose something or it is stolen you are outraged, yet you are going to lose it anyway. ‘It is mine, give it back to me’ – and yet you are going to lose it all. So what do you think will happen to you, knowing this? - *giving more things away; loosening self-identity, attachment; freedom; less things to dust.* So imagine now walking in your house, looking at your objects, and knowing that you are going to lose them all at some point. I find it interesting that we tie our identity so much in objects. Not just material things, with their worth of money, it is more to do with identity. It is not the amount that you have, it is the attitude to it. So the point of this contemplation is to invest more in the practice, not to invest in things that you are going to lose anyway. To invest your money, your time in the practice, this will take you further for sure.

EIGHTH CONTEMPLATION

My loved ones cannot save me.

Our loved ones cannot keep us from death; there is no delaying its advent.

Holding this thought in mind, I exercise non-grasping.

With this contemplation you need to touch how powerless you have felt in the face of someone dying – you don't want this person to die but you cannot do anything about it. You can make it a bit more comfortable, for sure, but you cannot stop it from happening. No matter how skilled you are, how kind, how present they are with you at the time, still it cannot be stopped. So what can you do? Letting them go, not clinging on, to be more spacious, otherwise you can make it more difficult for the dying person to pass away. Maybe you can practise these with an animal, your favourite cat or dog; practise that you cannot stop this happening so the best thing is to be more spacious, non-grasping. It is also important not to have indifference, have a sort of blasé indifference to their death. Of course you can be supportive but not to hook; it can be supportive for the dying person that there is not a hook, to liberate them. Also that death is normal, it is not a failure; sometimes we approach it that something wrong has happened, failed, life is cut short; ‘he is

a great practitioner, it should not have happened'. No, it is the most natural thing in the world. Death is natural, death will happen. Who knows by how many years we are prolonging our life by the practice we do now – this may prolong it for a few years, but it will happen. But not grasping, wanting to stop it, it cannot be stopped. *The suicide of a young woman I knew, aged twenty-six, it is hard to feel cheerful about that.* Not to be cheerful, you need to have more equanimity. Death is natural, not to have a sense of failure about it. When someone young dies it is not a failure. There is a wonderful film called 'Departures', a Japanese film; very beautiful, touching, profound, moving. It is about death, dying, how to prepare the body for the departure.

NINTH CONTEMPLATION

My own body cannot help me when death comes.

The body cannot help us at death; it too will be lost at that moment.

Holding this thought in mind, may I learn to let go.

This invites us to contemplate how much time and money we spend on the body, how much identity we have with the body, and yet we lose it all. How much we are pre-occupied with how we look – am I thin enough, fat enough, fit enough? So you have to look at the pre-occupation you have with your body. There is a shift of awareness that you want with this contemplation. Non-attachment to the body, again to the identity we have with our body. You need to look at how dependent we are, positively and negatively, on our body; it is our constant companion. So what sort of relationship do we want to have with our constant companion – dependence or freedom, space? Not saying the body doesn't matter, but how does it matter? Letting go of things that don't matter. Go through the list on how much money you spend a year on your face, make-up, clothes, hair dye; just to come to a point where you can say, 'do I really need these things?'. Come into the spirit of it, not saying the body doesn't matter – not saying to walk naked – but how does it matter?

If we are not our physical form, what is it that survives death? My understanding is of a continuum of consciousness, it is the mind that survives the body. *And do you believe that this spark of mind survives death?* I do believe it. And so it is important how the mind is at death. *Is it individual consciousness that survives, or do we all go into a collective consciousness? I am trying to establish if you believe in reincarnation.* When I met my teacher Namgyal Rinpoche I remembered that this had happened to me before. My belief is based on what happened in the past, so if something different happened in the past, there will be a different future. It is like a remembering.

The point of when you come here, you expect some input when you are here; but the impact of what you have received will have its effect long after you have left – six months later. *All of nature goes in cycles; there is a saying in my country - if cherry blossom stayed on the trees we would never eat cherries. So why should human beings be different from the rest of nature?* This is what we mean by the intuitive level of knowing. You don't think about it, it comes from very deep and it gives you the confidence of knowing; this work is the way to lead you to intuitive knowledge, and then the awareness shifts. The practice would be wonderful if we could relate to each other as if we were all dying (which we are); to give the support, respect – because we don't know when we will see each other again. I feel this every time we meet – I may never see you again, so to give everything at the time. The knowing, the emptiness is this, you give everything as it is. *(in response to a question)* The contemplations are put together by a monk, but the contemplation on death is not new, it goes back through civilisation. I thought this way of doing it would be most real, there is no avoidance. I would like you to be soft. I have a texture in mind but I don't know if I can communicate it to you, to be comfortable with yourself.

In the space at the end of the out-breath, in the emptying there is no more holding onto the past, no more fabricating about the future, no more fantasising about the present. Where are you then?

I am sure that you will be stronger after this practice; I promise you more clarity in your life purpose, more commitment. And so, to end by re-affirming our commitment to practice, and for life:

The Bodhisattva Vow

*However innumerable beings are, I vow to meet them with kindness and interest.
 However immeasurable the sufferings are, I vow to touch them with patience and love.
 However inestimable the Dharmas are, I vow to explore them deeply.
 However incomparable the mystery of inter-being, I vow to surrender to it freely.
 From this day forth, with wisdom and compassion as my lamp and my staff,
 I dedicate all my life energies to the welfare of all beings.*

All beings are interdependent, all are our nurturers, our mothers: no preferences. Selflessness, it brings you outwards – how can I give, help others? To turn away from the negative, reinforce the positive. It is a vast picture – innumerable, immeasurable, inestimable, incomparable!

Main sources

Leaving Fear Behind, April 2010
 Opening the Heart, November 2009
 Calm Abiding and Insight, October 2007
 Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind, September 2004

Notes

The intention has been to present Sonia's words as she spoke, to preserve the flavour and the spirit of her teaching. Anything else is in italics: contributions from students, texts, editing links, other languages (mainly *Pali*).

Only two significant aspects of the teaching have been omitted:

1. instructions for body work exercises / movements, which are learned from demonstration and experience;
2. the *sadhana* texts for deity practice (*vajrayana*), which traditionally are available only to those who were present during the practice and thus received direct transmission of energy from the teacher.

Acknowledgements

This text of teachings are based on notes taken by Gill Blair over the years of 2004-2010.

I would like to thank Gill Blair for her dedication in taking hours of notes over the past seven years and for editing and seeing this project to completion for the benefit of the larger *sangha*.

I also would like to thank Jane Sethi, Marion Pahlen, Eleri Walters and Peter May for their valuable comments in the finishing phase of the editing.

