

Practice Session for April 22, 2018

A large part of Buddhist teaching refers to death teachings. These teachings point out how to live a wise life that will lead a practitioner to a successful rebirth. If rebirth is not a concept that you believe in, practicing for a good life is a reward in and of itself.

This week I have included a poem, *When Death Comes*, by [Mary Oliver](#), *The Five Remembrances*, from the [Upajjhatthana Sutta: Subjects for Contemplation](#), and *The Five Invitations*, by [Frank Ostaseski](#).

I also included a piece of [Steve Armstrong](#)'s notes on his journey after having brain surgery for a glioblastoma, a rapidly advancing brain tumor. He has 14 months or so to live, as predicted by his oncologist. Steve spent about 9 years as a monk in Asia. He and [Kamala Masters](#) are partners. You can read all the notes on [Caring Bridge](#).

Reflections:

1. Can you bear witness to the thoughts and feelings that these excerpts arouse?
2. What caught your attention and can you share this with the group?
3. "Like a dream,
Whatever I enjoy
Will become a memory;
The past is not revisited."

-- [Shantideva](#)

When Death Comes by Mary Oliver

When death comes
Like a hungry bear in autumn;
When death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

To buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
When death comes like the measles-pox;

When death comes
Like an iceberg between the shoulder blades;

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering;
What is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
As a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
And look upon time as no more than an idea,
And I consider eternity as another possibility,

And I think of each life as a flower ,
as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
ending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

Five Remembrances

1. I am of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old.
2. I am of the nature to have ill-health. There is no way to escape having ill-health.
3. I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death.
4. All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them.
5. My deeds are my closest companions. I am the beneficiary of my deeds. My deeds are the ground on which I stand.

The Five Invitations by Frank Ostaseski

1. Don't wait.
2. Welcome everything, push away nothing.
3. Bring your whole self to the experience.
4. Find a place of rest in the middle of things.
5. Cultivate don't know mind

Steve Armstrong – Notes on Dying

It took me reading info, other's personal experience with GMB, watching a sobering webinar and finally a personal conversation with my radio-oncologist, Dr. Lester Greer, before finally groking what is going on in here from a medical perspective. I have survived brain tumor surgery and am now living with a very rare, aggressive, fast growing cancer ([GBM: glioblastoma multiforme](#)) that cannot be cured but is treated with a standard protocol of radiology and chemo. Ten years ago, with radiology treatment alone, the average survival rate of the diagnosis that I have received was just four months; now with radiology and chemo it is 14+ months. That is the statistic.

Since the time I read in [Journey to Ixtlan](#), by [Carlos Castañeda](#), the wisdom of accepting one's death as an advisor, and the Buddha's admonition to reflect daily on one's death, have helped to prepare me for living with a diagnosis like this. A couple days ago Kamala, Brian and I went to see an old friend [Bodhi Be](#) who created the Death Store on Maui (<http://www.doorwayintolight.org/>), and who helps with advanced health directives, and the logistics of dying. In our conversation, he posed the question, "When did you begin dying?"

Only at the moment, when that diagnosis eventually landed in my heart did I feel my death touch me in a unique way that hasn't left.

It has been a long, 9-day journey back to life.

I feel quite prepared to die. There is something of a relief in being prepared to let go of all that has been so preoccupying for decades; something terminal about death. Being able to say, there, have done that. Sure, there have been momentary glimpses of sadness, self-pity, bewilderment, thoughts of unfinished work undone, ... and lots of wonder, awe, gratitude, ... with fascination with the process. Unexpected tears provoke a wonder at what is this I feel. Wondering too how others understand living with this condition. I've quickly recognized we all are in this condition, some of us acknowledging already and some not yet. I feel immense compassion for myself and others who know as well as others who do not yet know they will die. I've often encouraged students, if you want to know what occurs at death, you'll need to pay attention to each moment of life. How else will we know for our self for sure? Even now, I am still only coming to understand more of what is involved.

I am quite enjoying the wonder in this process and the fascination just clearly seeing the silhouettes of individual trees at 5-6,000' along the ridge line of [Haleakala Crater](#) to the east, backlit in the dawn light as I walk to breakfast, listening to the sunrise symphony of the awakening flock of birds roosting in the nearby bamboo grove. Amazingly awesome! There will be a last time to see and hear this.

Morning and sunset meditations with others in the communal silence and stillness are special.

Evening discussions with friends over tea sharing the reflections of the day have covered a lot of the terrain of the advanced health care directives, the reflections, ideas, beliefs, and assumptions exposed through discussions of the [Five Wishes](#), drafting a will and enduring power of attorney, articulating the intimate details of wishes at death exposing the unknown, etc.

While the solitude, seclusion, and the silence of the inner terrain are more familiar to me and are invaluable in the preparation for what will come; navigating the social dimension of living is more challenging for me. This terminal process is not only about me. Others too are participating in this. We are doing this living together. Kamala has reminded me that I'm stilling living and may have something yet to offer. I feel ready to go, maybe a little too willing, but clearly life hasn't let me go yet. So, I'll see how this continues to unfold.
