

Meditation Practice: A Practice of Dying

by Joseph Goldstein

In many ways meditation helps us to understand and relate to death and dying. The word for meditation in Pali is "*bhavana*" which means mental development, or bringing forth. In meditation practice we develop or bring forth a certain mental strength, so that the mind is not easily moved by reactions of fear or anxiety about unpleasant things. The practice trains the mind to pay attention to what is happening in the moment, rather than being lost and carried away by trains of thoughts, fantasies and reactions. We come to face and accept a whole range of bodily sensations, some of which can be very painful. We learn to sustain balance and equanimity with a wide range of emotions. From this place of strength and balance, the mind is able to be with fearful or difficult experiences with less wavering or agitation. It is likely that some of these difficult experiences will arise in the process of dying, and to the extent that we have developed an ability to be with them, there will be that much more balance and peace at the time of death.

Meditation practice also deepens our understanding of dying through a gradual refinement of our experience of impermanence. We all know with our intellects that things are changing. Our work is to know it from living it, from the inside out. There is an interesting and subtle progression in meditation practice regarding our perception of change. At first we are aware of different experiences after they have already arisen. We notice them in the middle of their lifespan. For example, we may become aware of a thought or sensation or emotion only after it has been there for some time. But as mindfulness gets stronger and our perception clearer, we begin to see objects more quickly, just at the moment of their arising. And when the practice deepens even further, then we can clearly experience the beginning, middle and ending of phenomena. There is a growing understanding of momentary birth and death as we see thoughts, sensations, emotions, sounds and images arise and pass away moment after moment. The distinctness and discontinuity of phenomena is experienced very closely and intimately.

Following this stage of seeing the arising and passing away, the perspective shifts once again until it is primarily focused on the dissolution of each object. At this time the mind is seeing a continual momentary vanishing of whatever arises. There is the very real sense of not having anything to hold onto because everything is disappearing so quickly. The power of this insight into dissolution is greatly enhanced by the awareness that not only are the objects of perception vanishing, but also the consciousness which knows them. Even though we might have previously seen that objects come and go, there might still have been a real sense of *someone* who was observing it all, *someone* who was knowing. But now even the knower is continually dissolving and vanishing in each moment. There is a deep sense of dying, moment to moment. When we see that consciousness itself is part of this process of momentary change, it can feel as if the rug is pulled out from under us. There's no place to take a stand, there's no place for the sense of "I" to reside. The stage of dissolution is quite a powerful turning point in the practice and gives new meaning to our understanding of death and letting go.

Perhaps the most profound experience of dying that happens in meditation is the experience of nibbana, the unconditioned, because that is opening to something which is beyond this mind-body altogether. The Buddha described it as the deathless, because it is something which is not born and therefore doesn't die. Opening to nibbana is a dying to everything we know, because it is beyond the domain or realm of the ordinary mind and its objects. This death into the deathless has a tremendous transforming power, because it is an opening to a reality beyond ourselves, from which perspective we have a more complete understanding of who we are and what this process of life and death is about.