

CHAPTER 4

IMPERMANENCE

Of these, the first instruction is meditation on impermanence as the antidote to attachment to this life. In general, all composite phenomena are impermanent. Buddha said:

O monks! All composite phenomena are impermanent.

In what way are they impermanent? The end of accumulation is dispersion. The end of all construction is falling. The end of meeting is separating. The end of life is death. The *Verses Spoken Intentionally* say:

The result of all accumulation is dispersion. The result of construction is falling. All who meet together separate. The end of life is death.

How do we meditate on this? The summary:

*Classification, method of meditation, and
Beneficial effects of meditation—
These three comprise
All the contemplations on impermanence.*

I. CLASSIFICATION

As to classification, there are two types:

- A. impermanence of the outer world and
- B. impermanence of the inner sentient beings.¹

In addition, impermanence of the outer world is categorized in two parts: gross impermanence and subtle impermanence. The inner world is also categorized in two parts: impermanence of others and of oneself.

II. METHOD OF MEDITATION

A. Impermanence of the Outer World.

1. First, Consider the Gross Impermanence of the Outer World

From down below this cosmic circle of wind up to the fourth stage of meditative concentration, there is nothing that has the nature of permanence or solidity; nothing is unchanging. Sometimes, everything from the first stage of meditative concentration and below is destroyed by fire. Sometimes, everything from the second stage of meditative concentration and below is destroyed by water. Sometimes, everything from the third stage of meditative concentration and below is destroyed by wind.

When the world is destroyed by fire, it does not even leave any ash, like oil consumed by fire. When it is destroyed by water, no sediment is left, like salt dissolved in water. When the world is destroyed by wind, not even a tiny particle remains, like a heap of dust blown by a strong wind. This is explained in the *Treasury of Abhidharma*:

This world will be destroyed by fire seven times and then once by water. When it has been destroyed by water seven times, then it will be destroyed by fire seven times. At the end, it is destroyed by wind.

The fourth stage of meditative concentration will not be destroyed by fire, water, or wind. It is self-extinguishing when the sentient being within it dies. The *Treasury of Abhidharma* says:

The impermanence of those palaces arises and dissolves with the sentient beings.

Further, it appears that this world will be destroyed by fire. The *Householder Palgyin-Requested Sutra* says:

After one kalpa this world, which has the nature of space, will become space. Even Mount Meru will burn and disintegrate.

2. Subtle Impermanence of the Outer World

Subtle impermanence can be seen in the changing of the four seasons, in the rising and setting of the sun and moon, and in the vanishing of the instant moment.

First, by the powerful appearance of spring in this outer world, the ground becomes soft, colors become reddish, and grass, trees, and vegetables all start sprouting. This is but a sign of change, caused by impermanence. By the powerful appearance of summer, the ground becomes wet, the colors become green, and the trees, grass, vegetables, and leaves open. This is also change caused by impermanence. By the power of autumn, the ground becomes hard, the colors become yellowish, and the trees, grass and fruit ripen. This also signifies impermanence, the changing of time. By the powerful approach of winter, all the ground becomes frozen, colors fade to grayish, and the grass and trees grow dry. This also demonstrates the changing times, impermanence.

“Impermanence in the rising and setting of the sun and moon” means that by the power of daybreak, this outer world is clear and white, but when night comes, it becomes dark. This is also a sign of impermanence.

Third is impermanence “seen in the vanishing of the instant moment,” each and every moment. The first moment of this world does not exist in the second moment. Each moment is similar and because of the similarity, we are deluded and perceive them as the same, like the flowing of a river.

B. Impermanence of the Inner Sentient Beings.

1. Impermanence of Others.

From the two types of impermanence associated with the inner sentient beings, the first one is impermanence of others. All the sentient beings in the three worlds are impermanent. The *Noble Profound Representation Sutra* says:

The three worlds are as impermanent as autumn clouds.

2. Second, the Impermanence of Oneself.

We also have to go to another life without choice. This may be understood by:

- a) investigating impermanence within oneself, and by
- b) applying others’ impermanence [to oneself].

a) Investigating Impermanence within Oneself.

Meditate on the first one in these ways: meditate on death, meditate on the characteristics of death, meditate on life’s exhaustion, and meditate on separation.

To meditate on death, one should think, “I myself cannot stay long in this world and will have to go to the next life.” Contemplate this.

Meditate on the characteristics of death by contemplating, “My life ends, this breath ceases, this body becomes a corpse, and this mind has to wander in different places.” Simply contemplate this.

Meditate on the exhaustion of life by contemplating, “From last year until now, one year has passed, and by that amount my life has become shorter. From last month to this, one month has passed, and my life is that much shorter. From yesterday to today is one day, and by this much my life is shorter. The moment that just passed right now is the passing of one moment. By that measure, my life is shorter.” *Engaging in the Conduct of Bodhisattvas* says:

*Definitely remaining neither day nor night,
Life is always slipping by
And never getting any longer,
Why will death not come to one like me?*

Meditate on separation by contemplating, “Right now, whatever I have—my relatives and wealth, this body and so forth that I cherish so much—none of this can accompany me forever. One day soon I will have to

separate from them.” Contemplate that. *Engaging in the Conduct of Bodhisattvas* says:

*Up until now, I did not understand
That I would have to leave all things behind.*

Another way to practice this meditation [on the impermanence of oneself] is to contemplate the “three by three” topics.² Meditate on the impermanence of death by contemplating:

1. I will definitely die.
2. The time of death is uncertain.
3. There will be no help when death occurs.

1. There are three reasons for the certainty of death:

- a. because there is no one from the past who is alive,
- b. because this body is composite, and
- c. because life is becoming exhausted every moment, death will definitely occur.

a. My death is certain because no one from the past is alive.

Acharya Ashvaghosha said:

Whether on the earth or in the heavens, have you seen any who were born who did not die or have you even heard of any? And still you have doubt!

Therefore, even great beings who had infinite clairvoyance and miracle powers could not escape to a place where there is no death. To say nothing of people like ourselves! It is said:

Great sages with five types of clairvoyance³ could fly far in the sky, yet could not find a place where no one dies.

Not only that, but noble beings—Solitary Realizers, the great Arhat Hearers—finally had to leave their bodies. To say nothing of people like ourselves! The *Verses Spoken Intentionally* say:

All the Solitary Realizers and the Buddha’s Hearers leave their bodies, so why wouldn’t ordinary people like us?

Not only that, even the perfect, complete Buddha, the Nirmanakaya body with the major and minor marks and a nature like the indestructible vajra, also left the body. To say nothing of people like ourselves! Acharya Ashvaghosha said:

The form of all the Buddhas, adorned by the major and minor marks—even his vajra-like body is impermanent. To say nothing of other beings’ bodies which are without essence, like a water tree!⁴

b. My death is certain because this body is composite and all composite phenomena are impermanent.

Everything that is composite is of a perishable nature. The *Verses Spoken Intentionally* say:

Alas! As all that are composite are impermanent, they are subject to birth and death.

Since this body is not non-composite, it must be composite; therefore, it is impermanent and death is definite.

c. My death is certain because life is being exhausted at every moment.

Every moment, life moves closer to death. We may not perceive this or be aware of it, but it can be examined with examples. As an arrow shot by a skillful archer, as water falling from a steep mountain, as a person being led to execution, life passes rapidly.

In the first simile, when an archer shoots his arrow at a target, the arrow does not stop in space for one moment until it reaches the target. Likewise, our life does not stay in one place for even a moment; it approaches death quickly. As it is said:

Just like an arrow shot by a skillful archer: as soon as the string is released, it does not stay but quickly reaches its target. So also is the life of all humans.

In the second example, just as water falls from a steep mountain without pausing for a moment, likewise it is very obvious that a person's life does not pause. The *Precious Pinnacle Collection* says:

Friends! This life passes quickly like water falling from a steep mountain cliff. A childish person is not aware of this and becomes arrogantly drunk on foolish wealth.

Also, the *Verses Spoken Intentionally* say:

Like the current of a great river, which moves on without turning back.

In the third example, a prisoner being led to execution, every step that prisoner takes brings him closer to death. Similarly, our lives are also closer to death every minute. Thus, the *Noble Tree Sutra* says:

As a prisoner is led to execution, every step he takes leads him closer to death.

Also, the *Verses Spoken Intentionally* say:

For a person who will definitely be executed, every step he makes draws him closer to the execution. So also is the life of all humans.

2. The uncertainty of the time of death is explained by three reasons:

- a. because life span is indefinite,
- b. because the body has no essence, and
- c. because there are many causes of death.

Therefore, there is no certainty in the time of death.

a. In other realms or on other continents, life span is certain. But in this world our life has no definite length.

As mentioned in the *Treasury of Abhidharma*:

Here it is indefinite; it is ten years at the end and limitless at the beginning.⁵

Now, how is it indefinite? The *Verses Spoken Intentionally* say:

Some die in the womb, others at the moment of birth, likewise some while crawling, and likewise some while running about. Some grow old, some die young, some die in the prime of youth. Eventually, they all pass on.

b. Saying the body is without essence means that there is no single, solid substance in it, only the thirty-six impure components.⁶ *Engaging in the Conduct of Bodhisattvas* says:

*First of all, mentally separate
The layers of skin [from the flesh]
And then with the scalpel of discrimination
Separate the flesh from the skeletal frame.
And having split open even the bones
Look right down into the marrow.
While examining this ask yourself,
“Where is the essence?”*

c. “Many causes of death” means that there is nothing that does not contribute to the death of ourselves and others. The *Letter to a Friend* says:

*This life has many dangers; it is more fragile
Than a bubble blown by the wind.
It is a great marvel to have time to live:
To breathe in and out, and to wake up from sleep.*

3. There are also three reasons why there will be no help when death occurs:

- a. we cannot be helped by our wealth,
- b. we cannot be helped by our relatives or friends, and
- c. we cannot be helped by our bodies.

a. We cannot be helped by our wealth. *Engaging in the Conduct of Bodhisattvas* says:

*Although I may live happily for a long time
Through obtaining a great deal of material wealth,
I shall go forth empty-handed and destitute
Just like having been robbed by a thief.*

Besides not benefitting us, wealth harms us in this life and hereafter. The harm for this life comes from quarreling and fighting for wealth, and experiencing the suffering of becoming a slave to wealth, protecting it from thieves. Hereafter, we are thrown into the lower realms through the maturation of the result of these actions.

b. We cannot be helped by our relatives or friends. It is said:

*When the time of death comes, your children cannot become a refuge, nor can your
father, mother, or friends. There is no one in whom you can take refuge.*

Besides not benefitting us, relatives will harm us in this life and hereafter. The harm for this life is great suffering from the fear that they may die, get sick, or be defeated by others. Hereafter, we are thrown into the lower realms through the maturation of the result.

c. We cannot be helped by our own bodies. We cannot get help from the qualities of the body nor from the body itself. First, no matter how powerful and strong the body may be, it cannot turn back death. No matter how limber and swift, it cannot escape death. No matter how learned and eloquent we may be, we cannot escape death by debating. For example, when the sun is setting on the mountains, no one can postpone or hold it back.

*The body itself cannot help. It is said: The body, which is well sustained by food and
clothes that are accumulated through great hardship, will not accompany you, but will
be eaten by birds or dogs or cremated in a blazing fire, or will rot under the water, or
will be buried under the ground.*

Besides not bringing benefit at the time of death, it will cause harm in this life and hereafter. The harm in this life is that this body cannot tolerate sickness, heat, cold, hunger, thirst, the fear that someone will hit or beat it, the fear that someone may kill it, the fear that someone may torture it, or the fear that someone may skin it. Hereafter, by this body's faults, we are thrown into the lower realms through the maturation of the result.

b) Applying Others Impermanence [to Oneself]

Practicing impermanence of death “by applying others’ impermanence” refers to observing another person’s death, to hearing of another’s death, and to recollecting it in the mind.

First, practice the meditation on the impermanence of death by observing another who is dying. For example, consider when a close relative whose body is strong, who has a very bright complexion and a positive feeling, and who has no feeling of death in his mind, not at any cost. Suppose he is suddenly caught by a deadly disease. All the strength of his body is lost, and he cannot even sit up. His radiant face or complexion disappears; his face becomes colorless. His feeling is that of suffering. He cannot tolerate the sickness, he cannot endure the pain, the medicines and medical treatments have no effect, religious rituals and ceremonies no longer help. He understands that he will die, that there is no other choice. He gathers his last friends and relatives, eats his last food, repeats his last words. At that time, contemplate “I am also of the same essential nature, in the same condition, and have the same character. I am not beyond this reality.”

When his breathing has stopped, from then, no matter how loveable and important he may have been in that house, from that point on, he cannot pass one more day there. He is laid down on a stretcher, bound and tied across, and the corpse-carrier takes him out. Some people of his household embrace the corpse and pretend to cling to it affectionately. Others weep and pretend to be dejected, others fall to the ground in a faint while some other friends say that the body is earth and stone and that these actions are silly and not very meaningful. Once the corpse has been carried out of the house, and you see that it will never return to the house, then you should practice the meditation. Recollect all this and contemplate, “I am also of the same

essential nature, in the same condition, and have the same character. I am not beyond this reality.”

When his corpse is brought to the cemetery and thrown there, when it is eaten by maggots, dogs, jackals, other wild beasts and so forth, when the bones are scattered here and there, when you see these things, recollect as before by contemplating that “I am also of the same nature,” and so forth.

Practice the impermanence of death by hearing that others have died. When you hear that someone is dead or that there is a corpse, recollect the impermanence of death as before by contemplating that, “I am also of the same nature,” and so forth.

Practice the impermanence of death by recollecting others who have died. Recollect the dead, young or old, who accompanied you in your country, town, or home. Recollect this as before by contemplating that, “Before too long, I will also be of the same nature,” and so forth. It says in a sutra:

Since it is uncertain which will come earlier, tomorrow or the world hereafter, then without making effort for tomorrow, one should get ready for the hereafter.

III. BENEFICIAL EFFECTS OF MEDITATION.

Awareness of the impermanence of all composite phenomena leads one to release attachment to this life. Further, it nourishes faith, supports perseverance, and quickly frees one from attachment and hatred. It becomes a cause for the realization of the equal nature of all phenomena.

This is the fourth chapter, dealing with the impermanence of all composite phenomena, from *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation, the Wish-fulfilling Gem of the Noble Teachings*.