

Jeanne Corrigan
Closer Than We Think: Gentle Reflections on Death
Week One: “Why Prepare for Our Own Death?”
October 1, 2022



Dear friends, I'm really grateful to be here in the dharma with you. My name is Jeanne Corrigan, and I'm the guiding teacher at the Saskatoon Insight Meditation Community, where I've practiced for about 25 years. I'm on my home territory of Treaty 6 in Canada. This is the traditional territory of the Cree, the Saulteaux, and the Dakota and the homeland of the Metis, who are a mixed-heritage community of First Nation and European. My family is a mix of Swampy Cree and Scottish on one side and Swampy Cree and English on the other. Whenever I say that, I always think of my ancestors and elders, in particular, Jim Sati, who has really guided my life in many ways. Of course, in our Buddhist practice, we think back on the lineage 2,600 years to our elders and ancestors back to the Buddha.

I invite you as you're listening to invite any of your elders or ancestors in—spiritual ancestors, teachers, guides, or blood ancestors that you feel support you. When we do this practice of turning to our ancestors and elders, in a way, it brings us right into the heart of the theme that we're going to share and explore today, this theme of mindfulness of death, because many of our ancestors are no longer here in the physical way, but we still call on them, and we still have a relationship with them. It really brings us into the mystery of this contemplation. I chose to talk about this theme today because I've had a lot of fear about death all my life until about five years ago, when I started to turn to this intentionally. Since then, I've found a lot of freedom and a lot of nourishment.

As we begin, let's rest into the refuge of the body, settling in to feel your feet on the earth. Just right now, feeling your feet there. Feeling your hips in the chair. Feeling the balance, the steadiness of your feet and hips, the weight of the body in the chair. These sensations that help us know we're here now, this refuge that we can turn to anytime. During this talk or anytime that this issue or any other issue comes and you feel any kind of agitation or unsettledness, resting into this refuge.

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The arc of this talk will be in four parts. In this first part, I want to share some of the benefits that I have experienced through contemplating my own death and preparing for my own death. In the second section, I'll share some practices for preparation for contemplating our own death. In the third section, I'll talk about how to support others in this transition. And then in the fourth section, we'll talk about something that's been a bit of a surprise for me: as I've contemplated this issue, which has had some fearfulness for me, it has also allowed me to turn to other parts of my life where I had some fear. One of those places that is certainly an issue for all of us and may be a fearful or overwhelming one for some of us is the issue of climate disruption.

This talk will share or explore the fruit or the benefits of this contemplation for ourselves, for our close community and the people we support, and for the planet. The three benefits, or the three fruits, of this practice that I want to talk about have been that a gentle, balanced reflection on this topic has helped me feel much less fear. The fear is greatly diminished. At the same time, confidence has risen that I can meet this aspect of life with wisdom. And then the third benefit is that this practice is really intended to support the capacity to live fully and richly in this moment so that we feel the benefit right here, right now.

The first fruit is this sense of feeling less fear. For me, most of my life, I felt fear about death. I would have nightmares as a child, and until about five years ago, whenever I spoke about death, I would just burst into tears. About five years ago, I thought I needed to do something with this because it was taking up a lot of energy in my life. And so what I did was I invited four meditation friends to come together and talk about what felt present for us about death and dying. The first time we did that, I burst into tears. We don't meet regularly, but we have met for the past five years. Over the years, I have felt a definite decrease in my fear about this natural part of life. The practice that I want to offer with this benefit is to find a small group of friends that you can share with and begin to feel safe with and be able to turn to.

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The second fruit of this practice is the rising of confidence. I want to offer a practice here as well. Five years ago, I didn't feel any confidence that I could meet this part of life with any kind of wisdom. The practice I want to offer for this is that we can borrow confidence. We can borrow from our teachers. One of the teachers that I have borrowed confidence from is Venerable Analayo, who says that from all the range of our meditation practices, if he had to choose one, he would choose contemplation of death because of the freedom and joy that it's brought him. I can't say that I feel this joy, but I can say that I feel some quiet joy at the reduction of fear and at the discovery of confidence. I didn't have this a while ago. But when he talked about it, I believed him, and that helped me to turn towards this reflection.

We can also borrow confidence from moments in our lives, our own memories, where we may have had a glimpse of a time where we met this part of life with some kind of wisdom. I have two memories like this that I'd like to share with you that I call on for confidence. One was when I was on retreat. Many years ago, I was on retreat for about six weeks, and for some reason, the mind was worried about death. I had this recurring thought that I was going to hear some news about a good friend of mine about an illness or about her death. The thought got so strong that when I was practicing in my room, if I heard someone walking down the hallway, I would tighten up with a thought, "Are they coming to let me know about her death?" But as I practiced and my stability and settledness deepened, one day the thought arose about my friend, and a thought arose right behind it. The thought was, "Yes, that could happen." As that thought settled in, I felt a settling in my whole system. This capacity to turn to the truth of how it is let my whole system settle. And that's become an embodied memory for me, knowing that I can turn there and that that can support a calming.

The other memory I have is from before I met meditation. It was when my dad was dying, during the three or four days right around and just after his death. When he was dying, I did not want him to be dying. At one point, I left the house and went to the garage, and I had a huge cry.

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Something shifted, and when I came back into the house, I was able to be with him so completely and so fully with such presence and such care and connection that that time became a treasure. That night, I wrote in my journal, "This has been one of the richest days of my life." And as I wrote that, I thought, "How can I be writing this as Dad is dying?" But it was true.

I also wrote in my journal that night, "There's a lot of pain here but no suffering." This was before I met meditation and understood the vocabulary of how we speak about pain and suffering. But it was so clear to me there was pain but no suffering. It wasn't that I was denying what was happening. I was really fully with that too. This has opened up a doorway for me of possibility, and I draw on that memory, knowing that it's really possible to be with this part of life with great presence and great richness. So the second fruit or benefit of preparing for our own death is that we can build confidence, and the practice is that we can borrow confidence until we cultivate it on our own.

This experience with Dad leads into the third benefit that I want to share with you. What that experience has done for me is it has opened up this question: If I could be like that with Dad at his death, is there any possibility that I could be like that at my own death? I don't have confidence that that's really within my possibility right now, but I am borrowing confidence from all of the practices that I've experienced so far that I think it's possible even though I don't know it deeply. But I think it's possible.

Once I had that question, I realized that if I had died two or three years ago, I know where my mind and heart stream would have gone. It would have gone to self-recrimination, self-judgment, regret, and a sense of loss, and friends, I don't want my mind to go there on my deathbed. I have an aspiration that my mind go toward a wholesome place of love and care and connection and capacity to meet the pain and loss with an open heart. This is my aspiration.

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So the practice that I want to suggest to you is to feel into your own deathbed vision. What would you aspire to have in your heart and mind at that moment, at that time? Of course, we can't control it, but we can definitely influence what will be in our mind and heart at that time.

The second practice I want to offer is to begin to cultivate that here and now. Having that deathbed vision can be a big motivator to resting in those wholesome qualities now. For example, kindness is something I'd like to rest in at that time, and so the practice now is to notice and cultivate kindness here. What I realized is that although I think I'm a kind person, I can definitely abide and rest in that kindness in a deeper way. It's not like we have to become kinder people. I guarantee that you and everyone listening to this is a kind person. You don't need to be kinder. Consider that it's a kindness to yourself to be listening to this, something that might be of benefit to you. That's a kindness to you. And I know that you're kind in other ways, small ways. Maybe you offered someone a smile today. Maybe you answered a question that someone asked you today with presence. Maybe you sent an encouraging text or an emoji or a smile. Maybe you sent an encouraging email. Maybe you listened to someone who needed to talk. Maybe you let someone in in traffic. Maybe you offered muffins to your neighbor. We do these things, but we tend to not reap the benefit of it and really abide in the kindness. If I give muffins to my neighbor, for example, I might just say, "Oh, I had some extra, no big deal," or if I give someone a ride somewhere, I might say, "Oh, I was going there anyway, no problem."

Friends, I invite us to take a breath and just feel into what it feels like to be kind. You could do that right now. What does it feel like to be kind? If we stop and pay attention, we might find there might be a little lightness. There might be a little care. There might be a little warmth. There might be a sense of connection with that person. There might be a sense of a little loosening of our sense of separate self. Friends, we want to be able to stop and notice these. As we notice them, that's abiding in kindness in the sensations in the body. And that's how our body gets to cultivate and deepen this quality and other wholesome qualities. The practice is to stop

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for just a breath and just notice: What does it feel like to be kind? Can this be a refuge in this moment, in this day, as well as on our deathbed?

So friends, these are the three benefits that I wanted to offer today: the sense that this contemplation and preparation for our own death can reduce fear and free that energy up for our life; that it can increase our confidence, a confidence that we can meet this experience that's a natural part of life; and that we can cultivate a richness in living more fully here and now motivated by this reflection.

I'd like to close with a poem that speaks to this practice of kindness and other wholesome qualities and the possibility that they can be a refuge for us every day and also on our deathbed. I'm going to read a poem called "Grandma Sumana" by Matty Weingast. This is in a collection of poems that he has written called *The First Free Women*. These are his own original poems based on inspiration from the early Buddhist nuns, who also wrote poetry about their experience in meditation. This is "Grandma Sumana." I'll just stay quiet for a few moments after this poem so that all the words can settle a little bit.

"Grandma Sumana"

After
all those years
looking after others,
this old heart
has finally
learned
to look
after itself.

Each act of kindness
a stitch in this warm blanket
that now covers me
while I sleep.

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Just taking a few moments to let things settle. Thank you, friends.