

Jeanne Corrigan
Closer Than We Think: Gentle Reflections on Death
Week Two: “Death Awareness Practices”
October 8, 2022



Friends, in the second part of this talk, I'd like to offer some practices that I have found helpful for preparing for my own death. The first practice is whenever we speak about this or whenever I contemplate, I settle into the refuge of the body, feet on the floor. Sometimes I have a reaction to this theme and sometimes I don't, but just knowing I can settle in.

The second practice is to go slowly. This is a practice we never want to force or rush or push or feel like our heart has to do in a certain way, and so we can just go slow. A practice connected to this is to go lightly. This doesn't need to be super serious, and it doesn't need to be super grim. I have a friend of mine, a beloved friend, who has beautiful death practices. Sometimes he's tying his shoes or brushing his teeth, and he says to himself, "Someday, I won't be here to tie the shoe," and then he just carries on. And so it can be a light touch. A little homeopathic drop of this awareness goes a long, long way.

The third practice is to go small. We don't need a huge awareness practice. Mindfulness of death practice can go very small. Just bringing the light awareness sometimes of the exhale that just ended. The sentence that I'm just finishing. Sounds that rise and pass. Very often we pay attention to the beginnings of things or the middles of things, but we can pay a light attention to the endings and in this way let our beings get a little familiar with endings. As we do that, we get a little connected to the flow of experience: this is ending, and this is beginning. We get a little sense of what we talk about in the Buddhist teachings of this flow of change and impermanence.

The next practice I'd like to suggest connects with this, and that is to let nature support us. Nature is the embodiment of these natural processes of change. When our earth body connects with the larger earth body—say, we look out the window for a few moments at a tree or the sky or we go for a walk for 20 minutes in the park down the street in the city or we go for a weekend—our earth body synchronizes with the larger earth body and the understandings and the wisdom of this changing flow of experience. We develop in an embodied way, not a

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cognitive way, an understanding of impermanence, change, and beginnings and endings, that we are a part of this process of life, not separate. So let nature support you.

The next practice I'd like to offer is a practice I call the “of course” practice. When we have our human experiences, our human reactions, our human feelings of fear and panic and anxiety and uncertainty and dread, we just say, “Of course, honey, of course.” Of course I'd feel that way because I'm in a dominant culture that cultivates a fear of death, a denial of death, or because I haven't been taught how to work wisely with death. And so of course we'd have these feelings.

One feeling I have often is this sense of surrealness about death: that it's going to happen to someone else, everyone else, but not me. We've heard that from other people. As I say that out loud, I can feel the me-ness in that, the “I”-ness, that I'm not going to die. And it's just interesting to notice that, not to judge it, not to need to make it go away, but to notice. Of course I would feel surreal about it because I live in a culture that denies death, that conditions this feeling. This “of course” practice is lovely because it includes everything—nothing left out, nothing wrong as we do this practice of contemplation. It's OK to be afraid. I used to think that I had to get rid of my fear in order to be cool about death. But of course there'll be fear. I might be fearful even up until the very last. Of course, honey. Nothing left out.

This leads me into an aspiration I have for the time of death, which is that I have an aspiration that I can meet whatever's here to the best of my ability with an open, kind heart. This is part of what I call a deathbed vision, a vision for that time. In the context of a deathbed vision, what I would aspire to have in my heart and mind in that time, I want to share some practices from a doctor named Ira Byock, a physician who's active and well known and well respected in the palliative care field and the hospice field.

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An essay that he has written has really spoken to me about practices for preparation for my own death. This paper that he has written is called “Developmental Landmarks for the End of Life.” In it, he says, “Over time, I’ve found that there are tasks that are predictable that often form the emotional, relational, and spiritual work of completing and closing a personal life.” He goes on to say that he elaborated or put together a working set of these developmental landmarks that form the topography of the journey through terminal illness.

These are guideposts that we can watch for and cultivate intentionally and include in our preparation practices. Of course, we may have a terminal illness or a long illness; we may have a sudden death. We may die when we’re older; we may face death when we’re younger. I think preparing in this way can be helpful because we don’t know the time of our death. We don’t control that.

One of the practices that he includes in his list, which is also part of our meditation practice, is developing a sense of steadiness in uncertainty. This is a practice that he has seen as helpful. Of course, the practices of equanimity that we have in meditation cultivate this sense of steadiness and balance in the midst of things, in the midst of challenge.

Another one that he includes is, in his words, surrendering to the transcendent. My way of understanding that is surrendering or letting go of this sense of separate self and letting go into something much larger than this sense of separate, solid self that we tend to have. I often think of the words that describe Teijitsu’s experience of letting go. She was an abbess in Japan, and her letting go experience is described as “She let go of the clenched fist of her mind and fell into the midst of everything.” I love that description. We’ve had these moments where we feel a little loosening of the sense of separate self, very often in nature. For Ira Byock, that’s an important capacity and experience to cultivate, and it’s important for us in the Buddhist tradition. This is really the heart of our practice.

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Another one of Ira’s practices or guides is sensing awe at the transcendent, this sense of mystery that we’re in this process, this mysterious process of life.

A fourth practice is practices of completion in relationships, family, friends, and community. He’s written a book called *The Four Most Important Things*, and these are things that we can say to each other or express in our own ways to each other as ways of reconciling or healing or closing or acknowledging or celebrating or deepening our relationships. They may not all feel relevant for all of us in each relationship, but see as I share them with you if any land for you. The first one is “Please forgive me.” The second one is “I forgive you.” The third is “Thank you.” And the fourth is “I love you.” As I say those, I feel a deep call in my being to express those things to friends, family, and community. I do feel a call, and there may be ones that call you too.

Another practice or guide that Ira offers is that he sees the capacity to express sadness at the loss of life as an important capacity. I was listening to a remarkable interview last year with a Metis elder from our community here named Harold Johnson. He was beloved, and he died of cancer last year. He knew he was dying, and as he was dying, he called a good friend of his, Sheila, who was also a national radio host. He offered to her that she could interview him in his dying time. One of the things that he said was, “Sheila, I’m so sad to be leaving you. I’m so sad to be leaving you guys.”

It was later when I read Ira’s landmarks that I recognized that that was this deep capacity in Harold to be able to express that sadness. And this is something that we can give ourselves permission to do and also open the door for others to express their sadness in their dying time or their sadness about our dying time.

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Another one from Ira is the importance of telling our stories, telling the story of our life and making meaning of that. I received a huge teaching in this many years ago from Thanissaro Bhikkhu. I asked him, “What’s the purpose of life?” Of course, he knew I was asking him, “What’s the purpose of my life?” He said to me, “If you think you want to leave a legacy behind, be careful with that because that can lead to suffering. But if you think about your purpose in life as cultivating internal wholesome qualities that can shine forth, that’s a legacy and that’s doable.”

When he said that, that completely shifted my sense of meaning and purpose in life. Now, if I were to tell my life story, it would be about the times in my life when I felt an increase in capacity to live in or cultivate or dwell in or express wholesome qualities, qualities of the heart and soul. I wonder how you would tell your story.

This sense of the wholesome qualities of our heart as qualities that can give us purpose and that we can cultivate is a way for me to understand the very central teaching in the Buddhist understanding that there is something that carries on after this body dies. The sense of these wholesome qualities being what carries on resonates with me. Another teacher has described this as a mental legacy. I think it’s very interesting to think about this mental legacy that carries forward rather than a legacy that you leave behind. Of course, carrying forward those qualities would be without Jeanne. Jeanne would not be carrying on with those qualities. Those qualities may carry on, but not the Jeanne-ness. It can be helpful to contemplate the teachings of rebirth, and there may be times when it’s not helpful. The times it’s not helpful is if it takes away from our capacity or willingness or motivation to do the practices of cultivation of those qualities here in this life.

So friends, I’d like to summarize what I’ve offered so far and then offer one more practice of preparation. I’ve invited us to settle in the body, to remember this refuge, and then to go slowly, go lightly, go small. Let nature support you. Bring in the “of course” practice, which can include

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everything, nothing left out. Cultivate a vision of what you aspire to have in the mind and heart at your dying time, and let that motivate you now to practice. In the context of that vision are the practices or the guides of Ira Byock: developing equanimity, surrendering or noticing the moments where we can feel a loosening of our sense of separation, allowing or even cultivating a sense of awe at this process that we are a part of, considering completing in a good way and honoring our relationships, allowing the capacity to express sadness, and finding how it is that we could tell our story that makes meaning.

The final practice I'd like to offer you is also a guide from Ira. I'm going to share this and then share a poem about it. This is the guidepost for the practice of experiencing love of self. When I read that in his list, I thought, “Of course I love myself and care for myself.” But in reflecting on it more deeply, I realize it doesn't feel bone deep. This is not an egotistical love of the self. It's a simple appreciation. This is a wholesome quality to cultivate. One of the practices that Ira suggests can open up a sense of love of self is self-forgiveness.

I'd like to close with a poem that touches on self-forgiveness and many of the other themes that I've brought in, including the thought that this is all preparation for opening to love and care and connection and presence. I'm going to read this beautiful poem from Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer. It's called “December 31.” After I read it, I'll leave some moments of silence for all these words to settle.

“December 31”

I know it's just another square
on the calendar, another tick on a clock
in the Royal Observatory in London,
but tonight feels like a good time
to forgive myself—for thinking
I know anything. For wishing for life
to be any different than it is. For
blaming anyone or anything.

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For every time I have turned away
from helping someone else. Tonight
is the right time to touch the darkness
and feel how small I am, to expose
my fear for the future, my pain
of the past, and let all be flooded
by the shimmer of present mystery.
Tonight is the time to nourish
the pericardium of the world,
to take care of the one great heart
that beats in us all and trust
that our kindness matters always—
not in a conceptual way, but
in the very specific way we say hello,
the way we hold out our hand,
how we shape our words,
where we give of our time, and
how we open or wall off our thoughts.
I light a candle tonight, as every night,
and invoke my beloveds here and not here.
And though it's a small act,
it unfastens some lock in me
and says yes, this is more
than a date, more than a timetable.
This is an essential point
on the continuum of love.
This is a chance to bring light.

Thank you, friends.