

## Reflection on Death

Right after my 72nd birthday I wrote this *Reflection on Death*.

I know I am going to die.

I don't know when or where or how,

yet it's an inescapable fact

that my life will someday surely end.

During the process, there may be physical pain,

emotional distress, or mental decline.

But however it unfolds,

everything that I am will no longer be.

Everyone that I care about will no longer be.

All that I do will no longer be.

*This*, right now, will no longer be.

This is not a lament! It is simply the natural order of things: that the body gradually breaks down and eventually dies.

To deny this, or complain, or fight it—is to suffer.

To accept this, surrender to it, and embrace it—is to be free.

My intention was to recite this four times each day—an intention I've kept to fairly religiously. Prior to this I found it extremely difficult to actually take in, on a visceral level, the fact that I will surely die. Something seems to be almost hardwired in humans that make truly facing our death very elusive. The illusion we all subtly hold—that we have endless time—leaves us convinced that our life will continue indefinitely into some vague future. We are rarely aware of the extent to which this belief keeps us cruising through life in a numbing automatic way.

The point is: if we wait until we have a terminal diagnosis



**Practice Period** continues through the Closing Ceremony on October 13.

**October Sesshin** is full but applications are being accepted for the waiting list.

**December Sesshin** (12/26 – 12/31) enrollment opens October 8.

### Announcements

#### Sesshin Application

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it may be too late to begin the work of trying to live more authentically. We don't have to make this mistake. Regardless of our age or state of health, making the effort to acknowledge our inevitable death is a good beginning.

The first line, "I know I am going to die," is the essence of this reflection. It's an acknowledgment of an objective fact that we normally fail to consider. It doesn't matter how rich we are, or how smart or powerful or accomplished—to be born means that we will inevitably die.

The second line, "I don't know when or where or how," helps clarify and make more specific the comprehension of our mortality. It can be a sobering fact to consider that we could die next month, or next week—or tomorrow. Our reflection becomes even more specific when we consider *how* we might die. Perhaps we will die peacefully from old age; but there's also a good probability that we will die in discomfort from illness or disease. It may be difficult to even consider this, but the surprising thing is that by truly taking this to heart, we can free ourselves of the hidden fears that we don't normally want to face.

Once we reflect on when and where and how we might die, the next line, "Yet it's an inescapable fact that my life will someday surely end," puts an accent on the essential theme of this reflection.

The next line can be particularly difficult to consider: "During this process there may be physical pain, emotional distress, or mental decline." We may know that our bodies won't last, but when our bodily systems start to break down, it is difficult to avoid getting caught in emotional distress. Yet, as we repeatedly reflect on the fact of impermanence we gradually begin to include ourselves in the natural process of birth and death.

The next lines makes the reflection very real: "However it unfolds, everything that I am, everyone that I care about, all that I do—will no longer be." This awareness allows me to prioritize the things I most value, and remember to feel gratitude for what I have, since I'm aware that one day they will all be gone.

To truly highlight this understanding, the next line, "*This*, right now, will no longer be," brings awareness into the

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immediacy of the present moment. Sitting in my chair, reflecting and feeling the meaning of this line, makes it crystal clear that this moment will never be repeated. This new awareness puts all of our petty and negative things in a new light: excessive worries about aches and pains, concerns about stocks going down or bills to pay, questions about whether some food will make us fatter or clog our arteries, or anxieties over success or image. But the point of this reflection is to relate to these same facts in a new way—not as something to lament. Thus the next line: “This is simply the natural order of things: that the body gradually breaks down and eventually dies.” This is the key understanding that we need to make our own.

Our denial leads us to spend so much time struggling to fill our time—with busyness and diversions—as a way to avoid considering what is always right in front of us. Facing our fears will never be our first choice. Yet, at some point it has to become obvious that we can’t remain healthy or youthful forever. Trying to get our old life back just leads to unhappiness, and the unhappiness continues and deepens as we try to fight the inevitable again and again.

The last line of the reflection tells us exactly what we need to do: “To accept this, surrender to it, and embrace it—is to be free.” When we see our life and death as a natural process—this is what it means to accept it. It starts as conceptual knowledge, and then deepens into an understanding grounded in the body and in the heart. In this sense it is like a prayer, but the only thing we’re asking for is true understanding.

Once we accept the reality of our mortality, the next stage is to surrender to it. Unfortunately, we can’t simply force ourselves to surrender. What we *can* do, however, is breathe into the exact state of our own present moment experience, and rest in it, reside in it—letting it just be.

There is one step after surrender: embracing our fate. When we sense the finality of no longer being here, and feel the chill and want to turn away, instead we open our arms to it and embrace it.

Reflecting on our death is another way of asking, “Do I want to stay stuck in complacency and fear, or do I want to follow the path of living from a more open heart?”

Adapted from *Aging for Beginners* (Wisdom,

Nov, 2018), Ezra Bayda

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