

Befriending death

Spiritual Wisdom

One definite thing in life is that everyone is going to die. No one can escape this reality. The only difference is that some people die a little sooner and some a little later. The doctor dies as well as the patient. The king dies as well as the servant. This is a place where everyone dies.

—Sri Ravi Shankar

The death of your body is inevitable. Therefore, the truly intelligent thing to do is to acknowledge and contemplate that which you know is going to happen one day. Thinking about death isn't a gruesome task, but a realistic one! Remembering that your journey in this world will end one day does the following:

- Helps you to see beyond the materialistic level of life
- Inspires you to be generous with whatever you have while you're here
- Makes it easier for you to let go of ego and false pride
- Inspires you to bring more spirituality to your life
- Allows you to appreciate the preciousness of each moment

Once you've accepted the cycles of life and death, you also don't feel too upset when your body starts to age. Instead of thinking of them as "gray hairs," call them "silvery wisdom hairs". Look at those budding wrinkles as beautiful mountain ranges forged from the bounty of your life. When the time comes that your body isn't able to do all it once could, spend more time in quiet communion with spirit. As death approaches, make peace with everyone and everything in this world and pack your bags for the next journey, wherever it may take you.

Consider

Remembering that your loved ones will be gone one day can also help you to cherish every precious moment you have in their company. Don't wait until people die to appreciate them!

Don't Forget

Many great sages have suggested that seekers of truth should remember their eventual death. Here are more benefits that remembrance of death can bring to your life:

- When you remember death, you're better able to maintain a big-picture perspective that keeps you from getting as easily bogged down by insignificant, temporary details. As they say, you "don't sweat the small stuff."

- When your self-identification has expanded through remembrance of death, the insufferable ego isn't as a big problem anymore. (See Chapter 3 for more about ego.)
- Remembering death ironically holds a secret key to the fountain of immortality, because it urges you to discover and identify with your deeper self — the part of you that can never really die. As you become more comfortable with the idea of death, you may also become aware of an essence within yourself that's beyond birth and death, which is quite a perk!

For these reasons and more, you should make peace with the idea of death. After all, one year must die so the next can come forth. One blossom of a tree must wilt before another can spring to life. The *Bhagavad Gita*, a profound scripture from India, states quite simply that “for the inevitable thou should not grieve.” Doesn't this make sense? What better way to set yourself up for unhappiness than to fear and despise what is unavoidable? What if death ends up being the best thing that has ever happened to you — a fulfillment of dreams you never even dared to dream?

The most amazing thing

Once, in olden times, a king asked his prime minister, “What is the most amazing thing in this world?” You see, kings actually had wise men in those nonpartisan days, of whom they could ask such questions.

The king probably expected his prime minister to point to one of the elements that make up this world, or perhaps to describe a more subtle quality like love or beauty as the most amazing thing in this world. Instead, he replied, “O king. The most amazing thing in this world is that every day we see people around us dying, and we know that every single person has to leave this world one day. Yet, each person acts as though he is going to live forever. That is the most amazing thing in this world.”

In spite of all this wisdom about accepting and valuing one's death, being okay with death still isn't so popular on the funeral circuit. Of course, when someone you love leaves this world, you will inevitably feel sad. At the same time, while everyone is moaning about how terrible it is that the person is gone, or saying things like, “He was too young to go,” one spiritual practice is to stay centered in your higher awareness of universal perfection and to remember that from a universal perspective, nobody is too young to go. In this world, lives come and go like waves moving to the shore and then retreating back into the great ocean of spirit.

Don't Forget

Even when someone you love dies and you're experiencing sorrow and grief over the loss, you can maintain a peaceful composure about their death, while still experiencing and honoring your other emotions of sadness and loss.

Also, remember that your feelings of sadness over losing a loved one are really reflections of the joy and love you experienced with the person while they were alive. See the love behind your sadness and feel gratitude for the gift of their presence in your life.

Contemplating what is valuable

What would your life look like if you really acted from the understanding that you will be leaving this world one day? What in your life will keep its value past the threshold of death? What is most important in life? Money? Success? Relationships?

According to sages from a mystical branch of Islam called Sufism, the only things you bring with you into the "next world" are the thoughts, actions, and feelings you have cultivated during this life. Certainly, you won't be able to bring your bank account along!

A great way to contemplate what is most valuable is to imagine that you are at your last moment of life. You're about to leave this world, and with the profound shock and sentiment that often comes at such times, you take a fresh look at yourself and your life as a finite expression that has a beginning, middle, and now, an end.

What did you do during your life that feels most right? How did you help others during your time here? Were you honest? Kind? Did you explore courageously and dance enthusiastically? Did you rise up from mistakes and traumas by choosing a positive approach?

Contemplate what is most valuable in your life, and while you are still here, strengthen, increase, and expand whatever it is.

Spiritual Wisdom

When I arrived in this world, I was crying, and everyone else was laughing; and when I left this world, I was laughing and everyone else was crying!

—Kabir

Consider

If you're looking for an intricate spiritual view of death, one classic text is the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which is often recited by lamas or Buddhist priests over a dying or recently deceased person.

This text is meant to give guidance on preparing for and going through the various intermediate states of consciousness that a soul passes through between lives.

Spiritual Wisdom

Preparing for your last moment

Some spiritual teachings say that your thoughts and state of mind at the moment of death are what determine where you will go next. In fact, some have suggested that your entire lifetime of spiritual effort is meant just to prepare you to think spiritual thoughts during the "deciding moment" that comes when you reach the threshold of death. The Sufi poet Jelalud'Din Rumi poetically described this moment of decision as, "A century's worth of work, for one chance to surrender."

The Indian sage, Sri Ramakrishna, explains how ongoing spiritual practices prepare you to remember higher spiritual ideas during your important last moment of life:

"The soul reincarnates in a body of which it was thinking just before its last departure from this world. Devotional practices may therefore be seen to be very necessary. When, by constant practice, no worldly ideas arise in the mind, then the god-idea alone fills the soul, and does not leave it even when on the brink of eternity."