

Theravāda Buddhism's Meditations on Death and the Symbolism of Initiatory Death

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Death has a paradoxical status in Theravada Buddhism for it stands both at the heart of the human predicament and at the heart of the solution to that predicament. In Buddhist thought death constitutes an essential part of the human predicament; it is one of the central factors contributing to the imperfection of existence (*dukkha*); it is a pivotal reality in the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*samsāra*) that imprisons human beings. Despite this negative valuation of death, however, death also serves a positive role, for Buddhism has maintained that one does not find liberation from the human predicament by shrinking from death and avoiding all thought of death, but, rather, one finds liberation by confronting death and encountering it as an existential reality. For this reason and to this end Theravada Buddhism has placed emphasis on techniques of meditating on death. Although these meditations, involving concentration on the idea of death as well as actual observation of decomposing corpses, may initially strike Westerners as bizarre or morbid,¹ their effect on the meditator is

¹ For example, one Western scholar wrote, "Repellent in the extreme is the meditation of impurity, demanding the presence of the monk at a cemetery, and

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positive, not negative. Meditating on death one overcomes death; meditating on death one attains the deathless state here and hereafter.

This article attempts to analyze and explain Theravada Buddhism's paradoxical valuation of death by interpreting its meditations on death in both the specific context of the Theravada Buddhist tradition and the wider context of the history of religions.² We seek to show, first, that, considered in the context of the Theravada tradition, the meditations on death are neither aberrant nor contradictory but represent logical and consistent methods for solving the human predicament as Buddhism understands it. The meditations on death enable Buddhists to confront the reality of death and, through it, to understand existence, to reach enlightenment.

But the notion of meditating on death and anticipating death raises an important question for observers of Buddhism. Simply stated the question is, Is Theravada Buddhism unique in stressing the salvific nature of confrontation with death? Does this emphasis on meditation on death signify what some might term stereotypical Buddhist pessimism and nihilism? Second, because this question poses a possible barrier to Western understanding of Theravada's meditations on death, we seek, in the final part of the article, to place these meditations in a larger perspective in order to explore further their meaning and significance. By comparing the meditations on death with Eliade's analysis of the symbolism of initiatory death in archaic and primitive religions, we see that Theravada is neither unique nor pessimistic in its belief in the salvific nature of confrontation with death. Rather, the Buddhist meditations on death parallel and in a sense represent what Eliade holds to be a basic soteriological motif or pattern.³

the careful meditation on all the hateful aspects of a corpse in decay . . ." (A. B. Keith, *Buddhist Philosophy in India and Ceylon* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923], p. 123).

² Other schools of Buddhism also developed meditations on death, and it would be instructive to compare the meditations on death in these other schools with the meditations in the Theravada tradition. But this is a task for another article.

³ Although Eliade discusses the symbolism of death in many works, his primary works on this subject are: Mircea Eliade, *Birth and Rebirth: The Religious Meanings of Initiation in Human Culture*, trans. W. Trask (New York: Harper & Bros., 1958) (hereafter cited as *Birth*); *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, trans. P. Mairet (Evanston, Ill.: Harper & Row, 1960) (hereafter cited as *Myths*); *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. W. Trask (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964); *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. R. Sheed (New York: World Publishing Co., 1958) (hereafter cited as *Patterns*). In comparing these meditations with Eliade's analysis of the symbolism of death, I found both support and new insights in a brief comparison of this type made by Donald K.

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DEATH AND THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT

When the Buddhists reflected on death as a central factor of existence and the heart of the human predicament, they did so in the context of a rich tradition of Indian thought about death. Indian sages for centuries had speculated about death, its nature, its origin, and its causes. They personified death in the figures of Yama, Prajāpati, and Mṛtyu;⁴ they explained death as the result of *karma* or of *kāla* (time, fate) or of both;⁵ and in the Upanishads they declared death illusory in relation to the eternal self or soul.⁶ But as Frank Reynolds has pointed out, although the Buddhist conceptions of death “can never truly be understood apart from the Indian ethos in the last half of the first millenium B.C. within which Buddhism emerged,” neither can the Buddhist views simply be reduced to those of the Indian tradition because the Buddha and Buddhist interpreted death from a distinctively Buddhist perspective.⁷ The Buddhist conceptions of death differed in significant points from those of the received Indian tradition.

Buddhism defined death in terms of the concept of no-self, *anatta*. The standard definition of death, *marana*, which recurs frequently in the Pali Canon, describes death as “the falling away, the passing away, the separation, the disappearance, the mortality or dying, the action of time, the breaking up of the aggregates, the laying down of the body” (*Majjhima-Nikāya* [M.] 1.49; *Dīgha-Nikāya* [D.] 2.305; *Saṃyutta-Nikāya* [S.] 2.2; etc.). In this definition we see death in the context of *anatta*, as the dissolution of the aggregates, the factors constituting the individual. Death manifest the impermenence (*anicca*) of life. From

Swearer in “Control and Freedom: The Structure of Buddhist Meditation in the Pāli Suttas,” *Philosophy East and West* 23, no. 4 (October 1973): 439, n. 23; see also Swearer’s *Secrets of the Lotus* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 100–102.

⁴ On the Indian mythology about death, see Frederick H. Holck, “The Vedic Period,” in *Death and Eastern Thought*, ed. F. H. Holck (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1974); and J. Bruce Long, “Death as a Necessity and a Gift in Hindu Mythology,” in *Religious Encounters with Death*, ed. Frank E. Reynolds and Earle Waugh (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), pp. 73–96. See also Long, “The Death That Ends Death in Hinduism and Buddhism,” in *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*, ed. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), pp. 52–72.

⁵ The Buddhists also found it necessary to address the question of whether *karma* and *kāla* should be considered the cause of death. See the *Milindapañha* (*Miln.*), p. 302; *Kathāvatthu* 17.2; and *Visuddhimagga*, pp. 229. For the Hindu view of this question see M. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, trans. S. Ketkar (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1927), 1:411–13. Also Long, “Death as a Necessity and a Gift in Hindu Mythology,” pp. 81–83; and Holck, “The Vedic Period,” pp. 61–63.

⁶ E.g., see Chāndogya Upanishad 8.12.1; and Kāṭha Upanishad 1.2.18.

⁷ Frank E. Reynolds, “Death and Eastern Thought,” in *The Encyclopedia of Bio Ethics*, ed. Warren T. Reich (New York: Free Press, 1979).

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the Buddhist perspective, death is not illusory but constitutes an integral part of existence. As the formula of conditioned genesis (*paṭicca samuppāda*) shows, existence is a fabric of causes and conditions, and death is listed as the last link or result in that chain or cycle of conditioning factors of one life and the immediate cause of rebirth.

Recognizing, therefore, that the individual is a process of mental and physical phenomena brought into being by conditions and without an eternal essence, the Theravada tradition defined death analytically in both a long-term and a short-term sense. In the long-term sense, they defined death as the cutting off of the life faculty (*jīvitindriya*) spanning a single lifetime, that is, one rebirth (*Visuddhimagga* [*Vism.*] 229; *Nettipakarana* [*N.*] 29). However, in the short-term sense, and according to ultimate truth, they said that death does not occur simply at the end of a lifetime of an individual but at every moment as the aggregates arise and pass away (*Vism.* 238).

These technical and analytical definitions of the phenomenon of death, however, do not fully impress on us what Theravadins have seen as the real significance of death: They have traditionally regarded death as the archetype of *dukkha*, as the central factor in the human predicament. Gotama is said to have recognized the dimensions of the human predicament and to have declared, “Alas this world has entered upon distress/trouble [*kičcham*] for one is born, grows old, dies, falls, and is reborn, but no one knows an escape from this suffering, from old age and death” (*S.* 2.104; cf. *S.* 2.5; *D.* 2.30). According to the tradition, the recognition of this predicament led Gotama to renounce his princely life in order to seek enlightenment and liberation (e.g., *M.* 1.163–67, 240; *Angutta-Nikāya* [*A.*] 1.145; *D.* 2.21–35). Thus, in keeping with the Buddha’s experience, Buddhism has viewed death as the fearful and disastrous culmination of an existence already marred by sorrow and suffering, and this tragedy, death, is magnified by the surety of rebirth and the repetition of suffering and death. The frequent conjunction in the texts of the terms *jāti* (birth), *jarā* (aging), *marāṇa* (death), and *upapatti* (rebirth) denotes the endless, tragic cycle of existence. As I. B. Horner has written, “The calamity is that death is not deathlessness; it still entails rise and fall of the *khandhas* and birth and anguish in *samsāra* again and again. . . .”⁸ Buddhism, along with other Indian traditions,

⁸ *Milinda’s Questions*, trans. I. B. Horner (London: Luzac & Co., 1964), 1:xlivii.

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understood *saṃsāra* as “re-death,” the heart of the human predicament. The duration of this predicament of death and re-death becomes incalculable, so much so that if the bones of one individual’s bodies from all his past lifetimes could be collected, they would form a mountain of skeletons (*S.* 2.185–86).

DEATH AND THE SOLUTION TO THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT

Although death represents the essence of the human predicament, or perhaps because it does, death also has a central place in the Theravada Buddhist solution of that predicament. Meaningful existence and liberation result from confronting death in life, from seeing death as an integral part of *saṃsāric* existence. Comprehending death, one comprehends life. Death, as the pivot on which *saṃsāra* turns and the archetype of *dukkha*, represents a basic datum for the wisdom (*paññā*) that rends the veil of ignorance.

THE BUDDHA’S CONQUEST OF DEATH

The significance of death for the attainment of wisdom and liberation has been pointed up in one way by Buddhism in the legends of Gotama’s enlightenment experience. Just as death was central to the human predicament that caused Gotama’s renunciation and going forth, so death also was central to his realization of a solution to this predicament. Without going too far afield into the subject of the life and legend of the Buddha, we can observe that the Theravada tradition has related the Buddha’s enlightenment to his understanding and conquest of death. In attaining *nibbāna*, the Buddha vanquished Māra, the “king of death” (*Suttanipāta* [*Sn.*] 332, 425–49, 1118–19; *Dhammapada* [*Dh.*] 46),⁹ penetrated the truth about birth and death in *saṃsāra* (*M.* 1.22–23, 247–49) and attained deathlessness (*amata*, *M.* 1.169).

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In the Buddhist view, therefore, the malady of existence has been diagnosed and a remedy has been found, the “door to the deathless” stands open. But the Buddha was the “giver of the deathless” only in the sense that he established or made known a possibility

⁹ See E. Windisch, *Māra und Buddha* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1895), pp. 192 f; T. O. Ling, *Buddhism and the Mythology of Evil* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1962), p. 56. See also on this topic James W. Boyd, *Satan and Māra* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975).

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that most people would not have seen without his guidance. His conquest of death and ignorance does not suffice for others. Death must be conquered, wisdom developed, and deathlessness attained in the life of each individual. For this reason Theravada has emphasized systematic methods for people to confront and comprehend death: the meditations on death.

Theravada Buddhism has traditionally taught and practiced two forms of meditation that we may regard as meditations on death: *marāṇasati*, mindfulness of death, and *asubha bhāvanā*, meditation on the foulness of the body as observed in decaying corpses. Both of these meditations appear to represent ancient practices in Buddhism. *Marāṇa* (death) and *asubha* (foulness) constitute the two central ideas in several complexes of ideas (*saññā*) set out as subjects for meditation or reflection for bringing one to deathlessness and the goal (*A.* 5.105, 4.46, 3.79; *S.* 5.132).¹⁰ In addition to these passages that place the meditations on death in the context of related ideas for reflection, other passages in the Pali Canon describe the meditations on death separately, attributing the teaching of them to the Buddha. Mindfulness of death (*marāṇasati*), for example, is described in two identical pairs of suttas as a way leading to deathlessness (*A.* 3.303–6, 306–8; and *A.* 4.316–19, 320–22). *Asubha bhāvanā*, meditation on the foulness of the body, is recommended by the Buddha in a number of texts (e.g., *D.* 2.295–98; *M.* 1.58–59; *A.* 3.323–25).

The meditations on death, referred to briefly and described in outline in the Pali Canon, are given life and detail in the later Theravada writings. The primary text describing these forms of meditation is the *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa's comprehensive commentary on the *dharmma* and the way. In Buddhaghosa's account, we have the great advantage of seeing the details of these practices in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, details handed down largely outside the canon from meditation teacher to pupil for centuries.

The *Visuddhimagga* explains that the Theravadins recommended various meditation subjects or methods for various types of people and that the meditations on death, *marāṇasati* and *asubha bhāvanā*, constituted two of these methods. Whereas the majority of the meditation subjects were designated as "special meditation

¹⁰ For a complete list of these *saññās*, see Paravahera Vajirañāna Mahāthera, *Buddhist Meditation in Theory and Practice* (Colombo: M. D. Gunasena, 1962), pp. 64–65.

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subjects," suitable only for one particular category of individuals, the meditations on death, *maraṇasati* and *asubha bhāvanā*, were considered "generally useful" meditation subjects, suitable for all categories (*Vism.* 98). The meditation teachers held that all persons could benefit from meditating on death, although some teachers seem to have taught that *maraṇasati* was more generally applicable than was *asubha bhāvanā* (*Vism.* 98), for the *Visuddhimagga* goes on to classify *asubha bhāvanā* as a "special meditation subject" for individuals dominated by lust (*rāgacarita*) (*Vism.* 114). In addition to the general applicability of *maraṇasati*, it was said to benefit especially those characterized by wisdom (*Vism.* 114).

Maraṇasati: MINDFULNESS OF DEATH

The detailed instructions for the practice of mindfulness of death, *maraṇasati*, describe this meditation as essentially very simple. The meditator is instructed to withdraw to a solitary place, there to focus his mind on the thought "Death will occur, the life faculty will be interrupted" (*Vism.* 230). Or he may meditate solely on the idea "Death, death." Despite the outward simplicity of this practice, however, the *Visuddhimagga* indicates that successfully developing mindfulness of death is very difficult. Human beings, although well aware of death, somehow avoid acknowledging death as a reality in their own lives. Buddhism has regarded this unexamined assumption of our own immortality and indestructibility as a major part of the ignorance (*avijjā*) that prevents our striving for enlightenment. In an interesting analogy, the Buddha is said to have compared this amazing human attitude toward death with that of a man who goes along not realizing his turban is ablaze (*S.* 1.108).

To enable the meditator to surmount this difficulty of coming to terms with the reality of death in his own life, the *Visuddhimagga* sets out eight specific ways of meditating on death. These eight ways represent eight reflections on various aspects of death which collectively constitute a powerful method guiding the meditator through progressive stages of confronting and comprehending the reality of death. The aspects of death to be reflected on are (*Vism.* 230-238): (1) death as having the appearance of an executioner; (2) death as the ruin of all success; (3) death as the inevitable end for all persons—just as it strikes down the great and mighty, so will it strike us down also; (4) death as the result of "sharing the body with many"; a reflection on the infinite num-

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ber of factors, both internal and external, that can cause death; (5) death as lying near at hand, kept away only by this frail process of life; (6) death as “signless”; nothing about it can be predicted or known in advance; (7) death as the certain end of a life span that is short at best; and (8) death as a constant phenomenon, occurring at every moment for the aggregates of existence. Let us look briefly at these eight stages of reflection and the way that they facilitate the meditator’s confrontation with death.

The first reflection exposes the meditator to the general truth that death is an integral and inevitable part of life. “It comes with birth and takes away life” just as surely as the executioner takes life (*Vism.* 230). Death is not alien to life but a concomitant of life. The *Visuddhimagga* says that just as “budding toadstools [or, literally in the Pali metaphor, “snakes’ umbrellas,” *ahicchatta*] come up carrying dirt on their heads, so human beings are born carrying aging and death” (*Vism.* 230). It is inevitable; just as the sun having risen moves towards setting, never turning back for a moment, or just as a mountain stream rushes downhill without stopping, so beings rush toward death without any possibility of a respite (*Vism.* 231). Through reflection on these and similar images, the meditator begins to develop awareness of the practical implications of the Buddha’s teaching “Whatever is born, brought into being and conditioned must necessarily decay and dissolve” (*D.* 2.144). Death represents one of the four inevitable things (*A.* 2.171).

The second reflection leads the meditator to another stage in the understanding of death by focusing his awareness on the tragic nature of death. Not only is death inevitable, but it is the inevitable destroyer of all human happiness, fortune, and hope; it represents the failure or ruin (*vipatti*) of all success (*sampatti* [*Vism.* 232]). No matter how much success a person has in this life, death waits to bring final defeat; even the great Asoka, who conquered “all the earth,” was defeated in the end by death and sorrow (*Vism.* 232). The meditator is instructed to see death as the tragic end of life and as part of the complex of *dukkha*. Death and the related factors of *dukkha* haunt life, preventing people from controlling their own existence and from attaining lasting happiness and success in this world (*Vism.* 232).

The third reflection marks an important transition in the meditator’s reflection on and confrontation with death. Whereas the preceding reflections have disclosed the universality of death, this reflection now compels the mediator to apply this universality

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to himself. The meditator shifts his focus from the theoretical implications of death to the personal implications by meditating on seven types of great beings. Reflecting on these beings, the meditator recalls that despite their greatness, they did not avert death. And then the meditator asks, "If this death inevitably befell those of great fame and great following, those endowed with great wealth such as Mahāsammata, . . . then how shall it not befall me?" (*Vism.* 232–35; cf. *S.* 1.71). This reflection recalls the teaching of the Sallasutta: "The young and old, the fool and the sage all come under the power of death, all end in death" (*Sn.* 578).

Reflections four, five, and six lead the meditator one stage further in facing death as an existential reality. To the realization attained in the previous stage, "death is a certainty for me," these reflections add the recognition of the imminence of death. The meditator reflects on the many diseases and parasites "sharing the body" that can cause death at any time (reflection four, *Vism.* 235). He concentrates on the countless external creatures, such as scorpions, snakes, etc., or the various kinds of accidents capable of bringing death. This fourth reflection represents one of the ways that the Buddha is said to have taught mindfulness of death (*Vism.* 235; *A.* 3.306, 4.320). The fifth reflection requires the meditator to concentrate on the delicately balanced conditions supporting life (*Vism.* 235–36). Life depends on ephemeral breath, on the proper balance of cold and heat, of the postures, and of the four elements, as well as on proper nutrition. If any of these factors are upset, out of proportion, or absent, life ceases. Compounding this awareness of human vulnerability to death, the meditator is next instructed to reflect that death, although constantly imminent, awaits in secret and cannot be known in advance (reflection six, *Vism.* 236). Neither the time of death, the cause of death, nor the destiny after death can be known in advance. Taken together, these three reflections (four, five, and six) create an awareness of the frailty and insecurity of life. They counteracted Māra's advice to rest assured for "there is no present approach of death."

The final stage of awareness of death is reached in the last two reflections which underscore the reality of death by indicating that life, even when it reaches its maximum, is brief. The seventh reflection reminds the meditator that the life span of people in this age is very short in contrast to previous ages. "One who lives long lives only a hundred years, more or less" (*Vism.* 237). The

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brevity of life is a frequent theme in the Pali Canon, and this reflection draws on canonical teachings to stress this theme (e.g., *Sn.* 804; *S.* 1.107). Buddhaghosa refers to a sutta of the *Anguttara Nikāya* wherein an ancient master named Araka explained the brevity of life with similes (*A.* 4.136–39). Buddhaghosa commends these similes to one who would meditate on death. The meditator should reflect, for instance, that: “Just as a dew drop on the tip of a blade of grass quickly vanishes and does not remain long when the sun rises, even so, like a dew drop is the life of a human being, limited, insignificant, and filled with suffering and trouble.” Or, “Just as a line drawn on water with a stick quickly disappears and does not last long, even so, like a stick’s line is the life of a human being . . .” (*A.* 4.137). The last reflection (eight) compounds this awareness that life is indeed short by reminding the meditator that in the ultimate sense death occurs at every moment (*Vism.* 238). Neither the past nor the future have any real existence. Life exists only in the fleeting present moment that is constantly dying.

To summarize these eight reflections of mindfulness of death, *maraṇasati*, we must recognize the total effect they have on the meditator. They bring about a confrontation with death. Even the sequence of these reflections seems to have been devised to produce the greatest psychological impact on the meditator. Undoubtedly, a meditator who diligently practiced mindfulness of death would experience a vivid confrontation or anticipation of death. Through this confrontation, the reflections overcome the meditator’s denial of the reality of death and compel him to accept his own mortality. They manifest clearly the predicament of human beings trapped in *samsāra* and *dukkha*. Going around in cycles of birth and death, human beings are like oxen yoked to a machine (*Vism.* 237).

But if this confrontation with death makes clear the human predicament and the urgency of the human situation, it also makes clear the way out of the predicament, for mindfulness of death leads to seeing the true nature of reality. Meditating on death in terms of these reflections, the meditator begins to comprehend the “three marks” of existence: impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and no-self (*anatta*). Life is impermanent; its conditions change rapidly, producing death. Seeing the reality of death one must conclude that human existence is insecure, insignificant, and filled with suffering. That we are trapped in these processes over which we have no control is an indication of the fundamental voidness of existence, or *anatta*. We can say, therefore, that this

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confrontation with death, through the mindfulness of death, *marāṇasati*, is salvific in the twofold sense delineated by Swearer: Mindfulness of death engenders both control and freedom.¹¹ It brings about control in the sense of disciplining the desire for existence and creating a sense of detachment from the world, and it facilitates freedom by moving the meditator toward liberating wisdom. What Swearer says about *sati* in general holds true for *marāṇasati*, as we shall see below: "It lays the groundwork for later developments in the meditative life."¹²

Asubha Bhāvanā: THE MEDITATION ON FOULNESS

Asubha bhāvanā, meditation on the foulness of dead bodies, also brings about a powerful confrontation with death that is salvific in the twofold sense of control and freedom. This meditation requires a person to concentrate intently on and to develop acute awareness of the reality of death manifested in a decaying, decomposing corpse abandoned in a cremation ground. Concentrating on a corpse in all its repulsiveness and loathesomeness, the meditator compares his own body with it by reflecting, "As this [my body] is, so that is; as that is, so this is" (*Sn.* 203). The meditator realizes that, "Indeed this [my] body is of this [foul] nature, will become like this, and cannot escape this" (*D.* 2.295; *A.* 3.324; etc.).

Theravadins have held that this direct encounter with the reality of the death of the body is necessary because one's body represents a primary source of the illusions of "I" and "Mine" (*Vism.* 195). The ego, desires, and pride are strongly reinforced by the misperception of existence that takes the body as the essential and permanent basis of the self. Appearing permanent and substantial, the body seems to constitute the essence of one's individuality. As a contemporary Theravadin has written, "Deluded by the seeming reality and worthiness of the body men fail to realize the way that leads to the cessation of misery."¹³ Observing a rotting corpse, however, destroys the illusion of the permanence of the body. According to the Theravada tradition, the meditator not only sees that the body decays but also recognizes that *asubha* or foulness is the true nature of the body (*Vism.* 193–96).

The *Visuddhimagga* gives a detailed description of the meditation

¹¹ Swearer, "Control and Freedom: The Structure of Buddhist Meditation in the Pāli Suttas," pp. 435–55.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 441.

¹³ *Vajirañāṇa Mahāthera*, p. 166.

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on foulness, *asubha bhāvanā*. For example, Buddhaghosa lists ten kinds of corpses that a meditator may take as the object of this meditation (*Vism.* 178).¹⁴ And after his graphic description of *asubha bhāvanā*, which would seem to indicate that this meditation was extensively practiced and taught by the ancient Theravada meditation masters, Buddhaghosa tells us that, even though the corpse in any form is repulsive, the meditation on it arouses joy and happiness in the meditator (*Vism.* 194). Because the meditator believes, “Certainly, in this way I will be freed from aging and death,” he values the corpse meditation as a beggar would value a treasure of gems (*Vism.* 188–89) or as a sick person would value a vile medicine (*Vism.* 194).¹⁵

Like *maraṇasati*, *asubha bhāvanā* leads the meditator toward control and freedom. Because recognizing the foulness of the body subverts the basis for all physical desires, this meditation increases the meditator’s control of his consciousness. It gives the meditator an increased sense of nonattachment toward the world and new control of his own mental development. In addition, this meditation furthers the process of freedom or liberation by revealing the true nature of existence. Seeing that the body is without essence and short lived like a great lump of foam (*S.* 3.140), the meditator comprehends impermanence (*anicca*). Seeing the intrinsically foul and impure nature of the body, the meditator recognizes the suffering (*dukkha*) of imprisonment in this carcass that “trickles like a grease pot” (*Vism.* 195). As a result, in the words of the *Mahāsatiṭṭhāna Sutta*, the meditator who perfects *asubha bhāvanā* “lives independent not clinging to anything in the world” (*D.* 2.295).

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What, then, is the meaning and significance of these meditations on death? As we observed at the outset, those of us in the West,

¹⁴ This tenfold classification also occurs in other texts; see *Atthasālinī*, p. 197; and the translation of the *Dhammasaṅgani: A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics*, trans. C. A. F. Rhys Davids (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1900), p. 69. The *Mahāsatiṭṭhāna Sutta* offers a ninefold classification (*D.* 2.295–97; *A.* 771–73; cf. *M.* 1.58–59).

¹⁵ That this meditation entailed dangers and was not intended for everyone, however, is shown by an incident related in the *Vinaya Pīṭaka*. After hearing the Buddha preach about the foulness of the body, and after practicing *asubha bhāvanā*, some bhikkhus began to despise their bodies and to detest bodily existence. But instead of striving for enlightenment, they persuaded another bhikkhu to kill them in order to release them from their bodies. This incident is said to have prompted the Buddha to make the third major rule of the *Vinaya*, a

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who approach this subject from a culture which in recent history has virtually prohibited all thought about death, might be tempted to regard these meditations as examples of a pessimism or nihilism which some critics have found characteristic of Buddhism. But if we consider these meditations in the context of the history of religions, we can determine whether Buddhism is unique in this belief in the salvific nature of confrontation with death or whether this belief is accepted in other religious traditions as well.

One does not have to make an exhaustive survey of the world's religions in order to see that Theravada is by no means unique in this belief. Eliade has argued that in archaic and primitive religions confrontation with death symbolizes and effects the transition from ordinary human existence to an enlightened or fully human state, from bondage to liberation or salvation. He writes, "Everywhere we have found the symbolism of death as the ground of all spiritual birth—that is, of regeneration. In all these contexts death signifies the surpassing of the profane, non-sanctified condition, the condition of the 'natural man,' ignorant of religion and blind to the spiritual. . . . Let us remember this fact, for it is important—that access to the spiritual is expressed in archaic societies by a symbolism of death."¹⁶ He shows that in archaic and primitive religions and societies this symbolism of death constitutes the central feature of initiation rituals.¹⁷ A symbolic encounter with death occurs in many kinds of initiation rites: secret society initiations, puberty initiations, and shamanic initiations. Other scholars, such as van Gennep, Turner, and van der Leeuw, have similarly indicated the significance of death rituals in initiations.¹⁸ Through these rituals the encounter with death occasions the entrance to the life of the spirit. "Initiatory death becomes the *sine qua non* for all spiritual regeneration" and the source of the most important religious experiences.¹⁹

In Eliade's analysis, the basic schema of initiatory death comprises suffering, death, and resurrection or spiritual rebirth.²⁰

rule that Theravada interprets as a prohibition of both murder and suicide (*Miln.* 195–97).

¹⁶ Eliade, *Myths*, p. 200.

¹⁷ Eliade, *Birth*, p. xii.

¹⁸ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 75, 91–95. Victor Turner, "Death and Dead in the Pilgrimage Process," in Reynolds and Waugh, p. 25; G. van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 1:197–98.

¹⁹ Eliade, *Birth*, p. 131, cf. p. xii.

²⁰ Eliade, *Myths*, p. 226; *Shamanism*, pp. 64–65.

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Many variations of this schema occur, however, and Eliade describes numerous patterns of initiatory death in primitive religions.²¹ For the purposes of comparison with Theravada's meditations on death, we can abstract the most characteristic features or motifs of these patterns.

1. The first feature characteristic of initiation rituals is a separation or seclusion of the neophyte from society. The symbolism of initiatory death thus begins with rituals representing the neophyte's dying to profane existence. The novices are assimilated to the dead.²² They no longer live in the way that they formerly did, in the way that uninitiated, worldly beings live. Sometimes their outward appearance is changed, their heads shaved, their bodies painted white or smeared with ashes. They may be required to wear special clothing or no clothing at all.²³ Various forms of restraint are imposed, such as dietary prohibitions and prohibitions of contact with persons of the opposite sex. The candidates are often required to maintain silence, to look at the ground, or to dwell in darkness.²⁴ All of these ascetic practices symbolize death, the candidate's death to the world.

2. The second characteristic motif of the symbolism of initiatory death is a confrontation with death. At some point in their seclusion from society, the novices typically participate in a powerful ritual symbolizing death. The novices enter mythical time via the rituals of the tribe and experience death in primordial fashion. In some initiation rituals masked figures conduct the novices through terrifying symbolic encounters with death.²⁵

Although these encounters with death occur according to traditional ritual formulas, they undoubtedly have a potent psychological impact on the candidates. Eliade offers a good description of the effects these encounters with death have on the young novices: "They [the candidates] had perhaps seen dead people, but it did not occur to them that death was something that concerned themselves. For them it was an exterior 'thing' a mysterious event that happened to other people, especially to the old. Now, suddenly they are torn from their blissful childhood unconsciousness, and are told that they are to die, that they will be killed by the divinity."²⁶

²¹ Eliade, *Myths*, pp. 197–200; *Birth*, pp. 130–32.

²² Van der Leeuw, pp. 197–98.

²³ Eliade, *Birth*, pp. 13–18; van Gennep, p. 75.

²⁴ Eliade, *Birth*, pp. 14–20.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 35, 75–77.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

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3. As a result of the ritual confrontation with death the candidate acquires wisdom.²⁷ This is the third characteristic feature of the symbolism of initiatory death: acquisition of wisdom, the supreme religious experience. Following Eliade's analysis, we can say that the confrontation with death is salvific because it leads to this wisdom or religious experience. Because this is its result, Eliade writes, "the mystical death of the novices is not something negative."²⁸ This experience constitutes a "crucial revelation of the world and life."²⁹

In primitive and archaic religions this wisdom or religious experience is conceived and developed in terms of myth and ritual. Through the symbolism of initiatory death the novices acquire the supreme wisdom embodied in the myths of their people. The mythical figures are necessary as the mediators of wisdom in primitive and archaic religions because, as Eliade says, "the dead know more than the living."³⁰ The dead are the guardians and mediators of the supreme truths of the myths. Without the tutelage of these mythic figures or spirits human beings could attain neither wisdom nor the spiritual life. In archaic and primitive religions "man is made—he does not make himself."³¹ He must be re-created after the models and the wisdom of the myths.³²

4. The final motif of the symbolism of initiatory death, then, is the re-creation or rebirth of the candidate. When the candidate has encountered death symbolically, when he has attained wisdom through religious experience, he transcends the ordinary human condition. "In philosophical terms, initiation is equivalent to a basic change in existential condition; the novice emerges from his ordeal endowed with a totally different being from that which he possessed before his initiation; he has become *another*."³³ This transcendence or rebirth is symbolized and celebrated in the initiation rituals by bestowing new names on the candidates or by revealing to them a secret language or other secrets of the elders. They have conquered death and now enter on a new spiritual existence, understanding the truths of life and death.

Eliade argues that this symbolism of death, central to spiritual life in archaic and primitive religions, is not restricted to archaic

²⁷ Eliade, *Myths*, p. 205.

²⁸ Eliade, *Birth*, p. 19.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 132.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. x.

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and primitive religions but continues in major religious traditions such as Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. In his view, "the archaic evaluation of death as the supreme means to spiritual regeneration founded an initiatory scenario which survives even in the great world religions. . . ." ³⁴ To be sure, Eliade's theory of the universal significance of symbol systems and archetypes—grounded in the human subconscious or "transconscious" ³⁵—has been sharply criticized and, indeed, does not represent the only possible explanation for the occurrence of similar phenomena in different, widely separated religions. ³⁶ Nevertheless, his explanation of the symbolism of initiatory death offers a useful theoretical model for understanding the salvific nature of confrontation with death. And although he does not discuss Theravada Buddhism's meditations on death in this context, they seem in many ways to fit this model and to be analogous to the symbolism of initiatory death as Eliade describes it. The meditations on death parallel the symbolism of death, although in them, as in yoga and tantra, "the experience of initiatory death is given new values." Both the meditations on death and the symbolism of initiatory death in primitive religions provide a systematic framework for dying to the world and encountering death, and both employ this encounter to achieve spiritual rebirth. A direct comparison of Theravada's meditations on death with the basic pattern of initiatory death points up these similarities and differences.

1. The first motif characteristic of the symbolism of death, dying to the world and withdrawing from society, is central also to the Buddhist meditations on death. To be ordained a Buddhist bhikkhu or monk, a person must "go forth from home to homelessness," which means renouncing the world and things of the world. And although bhikkhus may live in a *vihāra* in close proximity to a village and assist the laypeople through teaching and services, they are to be in the world but not of it. Many of the outward aspects of monastic life signify death, the bhikkhu's death to profane existence. In the early days of the Sangha the robes worn by bhikkhus were to be made from pieces of cloth found in the cremation ground or elsewhere. The yellow color (*kāsāya*) of the robe signifies death; it was the color of the robe worn by the

³⁴ Eliade, *Myths*, p. 227.

³⁵ Eliade, *Patterns*, pp. 448–45.

³⁶ See, for example, Edmund Leach, "Sermons by a Man on a Ladder," *New York Review of Books*, vol. 7, no. 6 (October 20, 1966).

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royal executioner in ancient India.³⁷ Possibly because of these ancient associations, Buddhists today in Sri Lanka regard a yellow-robed bhikkhu in certain situations as a sign of death.³⁸ And bhikkhus, especially those who adhere to the ancient ideal of the "rag-robe," are constantly reminded by the robes on their backs that they have died to the world and are close to death. Other monastic practices or ideals, such as shaving the head, vowing to abstain from all sexual activity, endeavoring to sleep only minimally, and living only on donated food all imply and effect death to profane existence.

In addition to these general monastic practices, a bhikku who undertakes the meditations on death further withdraws from the world in the practice of these meditations. The instructions for the mindfulness of death, *marāṇasati*, specify that the meditator should retreat to a solitary place to reflect on death (*Vism.* 230). And one who would meditate on the foulness of a corpse must go alone to the cremation ground (*Vism.* 179–82). The meditating bhikkhu, like the candidate for initiation, dies to ordinary existence in order to gain liberation and enlightenment.

2. In the meditations on death, as in the symbolism of initiatory death, the confrontation with death constitutes the central feature and the means to the goal. The confrontation with death occasioned by the Buddhist meditations, however, differs in that it is not conceived and accomplished in terms of myth and ritual but in terms of meditation and the Buddhist philosophical analysis of existence. This experience of death, although also carefully structured and equally real, is set in a totally different context. The Buddhist experience of death does not depend on entering mythical time and seeing death as part of a cosmic drama, but, rather, on developing an awareness of life and recognizing death as a natural part of saṃsāric existence.

Despite these radical differences, however, some aspects of the Buddhist confrontations with death have interesting similarities

³⁷ See the discussion of the terms, *kāsāya* and *kāsāvīya*, in *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids and William Stede (London: Pali Text Society, 1921–25), p. 212. On the practice of wearing "rag-robes" made from cloths found in a cemetery, see Walpola Rahula, *Heritage of the Bhikkhu* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), p. 8; and *Vism.* 62.

³⁸ See Edmund Leach, *Culture and Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 59. I have discussed this point with several Sinhalese Theravadins and especially with Venerable Walpola Piyananda, and these Buddhists confirm that the appearance of a bhikkhu, in certain situations, is taken as a sign of death. Venerable Piyananda suggests that this belief had something to do with the Sangha's abandoning (in Sri Lanka) the practice of going begging for alms in the early morning.

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to mystical death in primitive religions. For example, Theravada's corpse meditations (*asubha bhāvanā*), wherein the meditator imaginatively identifies with a corpse in various stages of decay, including the final stage of a skeleton, resemble the initiatory visions and rituals of dismemberment and death characteristic of Shamanism. Eliade notes that an essential part of the Eskimo shaman's initiatory ordeal is "mental contemplation directed to gaining the ability to see himself as a skeleton."³⁹

3. The results of the confrontations with death in Buddhism and in primitive religions are phenomenologically identical: transforming religious experience, attainment of wisdom and liberation. But because Theravadins encounter death through meditation and in the context of the Buddhist understanding of existence, the nature or content of the resulting religious experience and wisdom is different. The meditations on death lead to forms of religious experience and wisdom appropriate to Theravada Buddhism. To use Eliade's terms, the experience of death "is given new values." No spiritual beings or ancestral figures are necessary as mediators of the supreme wisdom in Buddhism. It is not true for Buddhism, that, as Eliade says of primitive religions, "the dead know more than the living"⁴⁰ and therefore must instruct the living. For Buddhism, the dead can only assist the meditator in that their bodies serve as examples of decay and death. Nor is it true for Theravada that, "man is made, he does not make himself."⁴¹ Rather, for Theravada the reverse is true: Man can only make himself; beings can only attain wisdom and liberation through their own efforts in meditation.

To illustrate the distinctively Buddhist forms of religious experience and wisdom issuing from the meditations on death, let us examine briefly the results said to accrue from mindfulness of death, *marāṇasati*. If developed properly, Buddhaghosa says, mindfulness of death leads to *sati*, *saṃvega*, and *ñāṇa* (*Vism.* 230 and 238–39).

Sati, commonly translated as "mindfulness," refers to the development of mental awareness or intentness. Nyanaponika describes *sati* as "bare attention."⁴² Because this awareness or mindfulness is basic to the development of the mind and the attainment of wisdom, *sati* is integral to the entire process of

³⁹ Eliade, *Shamanism*, p. 62.

⁴⁰ Eliade, *Birth*, p. 37.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

⁴² Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1973), p. 29.

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meditation as Theravada has defined it.⁴³ Mindfulness represents, according to Nyanaponika, the starting, focal, and culminating point of the "Buddhist mind-doctrine."⁴⁴

Sati is a fundamental constituent of both streams of the meditation process: *samatha-bhāvanā* and *vipassanā-bhāvanā*. Theravada expressed the close relation of mindfulness to both of these streams in its formulation of lists of the essential factors for meditation. For example, the traditional enumerations of the five controlling faculties (*indriya*), the five powers (*bala*), and the eightfold path all manifest the close connection between *sati* and *samādhi* (concentration).⁴⁵ In these lists of factors *sati* is preliminary to *samādhi*. But Theravada's explanation of the *jhāna* factors that arise as one advances in *samādhi* reveals that the perfection of *samādhi* results in a purified *sati* or mindfulness (*Vism.* 167–68). Lists of meditation factors also show the importance of *sati* for the attainment of wisdom (*paññā*). *Sati* is listed as the first of the seven "enlightenment factors."⁴⁶ It constitutes the awareness and alertness of mind necessary to overthrow ignorance and to perceive the truth about existence.

As a result of the reflections on death, the meditator establishes *sati* or mindfulness with death as its object. This form of mindfulness, like mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*), mindfulness of the body (*kāyagatāsati*), or other specific forms of mindfulness, constitutes a subject both for *samatha-bhāvanā* and for *vipassanā-bhāvanā*.⁴⁷ Buddhaghosa explains that when the meditator develops mindfulness of death, his mind becomes calm. The hindrances (*nīvarana*) clouding the mind disappear and the *jhāna* factors appear (*samatha-bhāvanā*) (*Vism.* 238–39). But Buddhaghosa notes that mindfulness of death leads only to the initial stage of

⁴³ The primary texts on *sati* are the two *Satipaṭṭhāna* suttas: *Dīgha Nikāya*, sutta 22 (*Mahā-Satipaṭṭhāna*); and *Majjhima Nikāya*, sutta 10 (*Satipaṭṭhāna*).

⁴⁴ Nyanaponika, p. 24.

⁴⁵ The five *indriya* or controlling faculties are faith (*saddhā*), energy (*virīya*), mindfulness (*sati*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*). The powers (*bala*) comprise the same five (see *M.* 2.11–12; *S.* 5.193–215).

⁴⁶ The *Ānāpānasatisutta* (*M.* 3.78–88) explains in very logical fashion how the four foundations of mindfulness lead to the seven enlightenment factors. When mindfulness (*sati*) has been established through the four foundations of mindfulness, it constitutes the initial link in the chain of enlightenment factors. The seven factors are mindfulness, investigation (*vicaya*) of dhamma, energy (*virīya*), zest (*pīti*), tranquillity (*passaddhi*), concentration (*samādhi*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*).

⁴⁷ See Swearer, "Control and Freedom," p. 438; Thera, p. 63. Also the *Kāyagatāsatisutta* (*M.* 3.88–99) shows that mindfulness of the body leads both to *samādhi* and to wisdom. In this sutta, as in *Anguttara* 1.41, the text states that just as one who comprehends the ocean implicitly comprehends all the streams that flow into it, so one who has mindfulness implicitly has all good states of wisdom (*M.* 3.95).

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samādhi, termed “access” (*upacāra*), not to complete *samādhi* or “absorption” (*appanā samādhi*) (*Vism.* 238–39). These limits on the level of *samādhi*, however, do not prevent the meditator from progressing toward *vipassanā*.

The second result listed by Buddhaghosa for *marāṇasati* is *saṃvega*, a term that refers to an experience or attitude leading the meditator, mindful of death, beyond *samādhi* to the path of insight (*vipassanā*) and wisdom (*nāna*). *Samvega* means agitation or a sense of urgency. It represents a distinctly nontheistic religious experience in which the meditator awakens to the gravity of the human predicament and sees that he must do to liberate himself. This transforming experience is said to occur when one recognizes the futility and meaninglessness of existence in *saṃsāra*. According to traditional teachings, the awareness of death is like a goad stick stirring (*saṃvijjati*) one to follow the path to the truth (*A.* 2.114–16; cf. *Dh.* 144). The *Visuddhimagga* explains that mindfulness of death and the experience of *saṃvega* enable the meditator to achieve perfect nonattachment and disenchantment with *saṃsāric* existence (*Vism.* 239).

Finally, through *sati* and *saṃvega* the confrontation with death leads the meditator to insight (*vipassanā*) and wisdom (*ñāna*, *paññā*). This, the ultimate result of the meditation on death and the highest goal of Buddhism, is attained by discerning in the reality of death the truth about existence. As we noted above, the meditations on death enable one to perceive impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and the absence of a permanent, controlling self (*anatta*): the three primary characteristics of *saṃsāric* existence. Insight into these truths starts one on the path to wisdom which, when fully achieved, shatters the ignorance binding the meditator to *saṃsāra*. Nyanaponika’s explanation of “insight” (*vipassanā*) is relevant here as a description of this culminating experience in the meditations on death. “It [insight] is not a mere intellectual appreciation or conceptual knowledge of these truths [*anicca*, *dukkha*, *anatta*], but an indubitable and unshakable personal experience of them, obtained and matured through repeated meditative confrontation with the facts underlying those truths.”⁴⁸ The meditative anticipation of death provides a vivid confrontation with these facts, and thus it has the power to liberate persons, transforming their lives and enabling them to fulfill the potential that all people have, but few attain.

⁴⁸ Nyanaponika, p. 44.

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4. The transformation accomplished by insight and wisdom represents the final motif in the symbolism of death: the re-creation of the candidate, "a basic change in existential condition."⁴⁹ As Eliade observed with regard to primitive religions, the candidate, having undergone this experience, "returns to life a new man, assuming another mode of being."⁵⁰ In Buddhism, the meditator assumes a new mode of being by entering the supramundane path or the *ariya magga*. With the emergence of insight, the meditator enters on the way leading from stream-enterer, *sotāpanna*, to *Arahant*. Through wisdom the meditator conquers both ignorance and death and now lives as an enlightened being.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to analyze Theravada Buddhism's meditations on death in order to explain how death could, in the Buddhist tradition, at once represent both the essence of the human predicament and a primary solution to this predicament. We have sought to demonstrate that the meditations on death represent logical outgrowths of the thought and intention of Buddhism. The aim of Buddhism is wisdom: seeing life with the eye of truth and living in harmony with that truth. Fundamental to an understanding of life, Buddhism has traditionally maintained, is an understanding of death. Confronting death as a real and inevitable part of life, one gains insight into the true nature of *samsāric* existence. For this reason, Theravada has placed emphasis on the meditations on death, *maranāsati* and *asubha bhāvanā*, as highly specialized techniques for confronting and understanding death.

We have compared the meditations on death with Eliade's analysis of the symbolism of initiatory death in order to provide a new perspective. We have argued that the meditations on death parallel and are analogous to the symbolism of initiatory death in archaic and primitive religions. Both of these systems value the encounter with death as holding the secret to life, and both provide for a mystical death to effect a transformation in people's lives. Comparing the meditations on death with this symbolism of death assists in understanding confrontation with death as a means to wholeness and liberation.

⁴⁹ Eliade, *Birth*, p. x.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

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For Theravada Buddhism, the meditations on death lead to liberation because they enable the meditator to see that existence is a process, a continual coming to be and passing away with no unchanging substratum. When one recognizes that life and death constitute a single process, the process of conditioned existence, then one ceases to cling to life and ceases to fear death (*Sn.* 804–813). One achieves, as J. Bruce Long writes, “a calm and confident recognition of the universal truth that ‘all composite things must pass away.’”⁵¹ Set free from attachment to life and fear of death, one is able to live fully in the present. Perceiving the truth about life and death, the meditator conquers death and attains the deathless, *Nibbāna*.

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⁵¹ J. Bruce Long, “The Death That Ends Death in Hinduism and Buddhism,” in Kübler-Ross, p. 66.