

‘THE MINDFUL DEATH’

‘While I thought that I was learning how to live, I have been learning how to die.’

~ Leonardo Da Vinci

By Ajanta Judd © 2018

End of Life Consultant / Counsellor / Therapist / Writer / Photographer

‘Whoever rightly understands and celebrates death, at the same time magnifies life.’

~ Rainer Maria Rilke

Death & dying are non discriminatory. Talking about sex doesn't make you pregnant just as talking about and contemplating your own death won't kill you. However, it appears that at least in Western Society, the amount of people who are terrified of considering their own demise is greatly disproportionate to those who are open to it. It is even commonplace for people to delay making a will for fear that this action will pre-empt their death. We have moved from a society where death was a familiar, normal and accepted part of every day life to one in which social conversations about death and dying are frequently avoided. This is a far cry from ancient traditions throughout the world where death was well prepared for and elaborate rituals accompanied the deceased person on their journey. The subject of death has become so taboo that theories such as ‘Terror Management Theory’ (TMT) have been established to describe existential suffering. TMT holds that people tend to respond defensively to reminders of death, including worldview defense, self-esteem striving, and suppression of death thoughts (Ryan, Niemiec, Brown et al: 2010).

Not acknowledging death as a natural part of life and denying this inevitable fact creates gross suffering in which an existential death anxiety runs in and through the unconscious and conscious mind, creating cognitive dissonance and robbing people of fully engaging with and enjoying life. This suffering within an existential framework develops from the threat to life or injury to the self, with resultant suffering in the form of distress, grief at loss, emerging helplessness, and likelihood that this situation will endure (Kissane: 2012). Every now and again,

death anxiety rises into conscious awareness as an anathema – often provoked by death in world news or at close quarters to the person in question. The surfacing of death anxiety is destabilising to the psyche and is counterproductive to a harmonious and equanimous existence. It would be logical and beneficial to address this disharmony and create a more open and inclusive approach to death and dying as a normal part of life.

After all, death is literally a transformation on the material plane, a transference of consciousness – a going back to where we were before we were born.

‘The irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive.’

~ Ernest Becker (1973)

Across the past century, social familiarity with death has moved from a regular family experience in 1900 to something that could be postponed, managed, and rendered infrequent by 2000. Mortality rates fell from 17 to 7 per 1000, with infectious causes diminishing from 33% to 4%, while cancer rose as a cause from 4% to 28%. (Kissane: 2002). Death has become unwelcome and taboo. Yet, death is an inescapable fact of life that, nonetheless, most people avoid contemplating too directly. When mortality is salient, it can arouse experiences varying from distress and anxiety to a sense of urgency and a search for meaning (Ryan et al: 2010). Although there are various ways to cope with this existential concern ranging from hopelessness, to denial, to seeking symbolic immortality, it seems clear that the consideration of death affects people intensely, whether or not such contemplation is made consciously (Yalom: 1980). Indeed, work within terror management theory suggests that mortality salience (MS) is a potent motivator of human behavior, even when thoughts of death exist outside of focal attention (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, Solomon, Simon, & Breus, 1994). According to this framework, people tend to respond defensively to reminders of death, including denial of personal vulnerability to death and suppression of death thoughts, as well as attempts to maintain faith in their cultural worldview and to enhance their self-esteem.

‘There is no such thing as a natural death... for every man his death is an accident, and, even if he knows it and consents to it, it remains an unjustifiable violation’.

~ Simone de Beauvoir: 1966

People may differ in their willingness to consider their death and in how defensively they respond to its inevitability. For example, whereas many may experience sadness or anxiety while contemplating their mortality, fewer may remain open to thinking about death and view it as a source of meaning for life. Patients can defend against the possibility of death with an omnipotent sense of specialness, religious belief in heaven or rebirth, the heroism found in workaholics, or active denial. Ultimately, people can adapt to awareness of dying with courageous acceptance, but when patients struggle to achieve this, common symptoms include fear of the process of dying, panic at physical change, protest at uncertainty, or spiritual despair about what lies ahead. A²

pending sense of stress, agitation, dread, sleep disturbance, nightmares, avoidance of medical care, and desire to escape can prevail. If we think about it deeply - every fear, every anxiety, every terror, may be traced back to types of death anxiety. It is all about death of ego, death of body, death of existence, death of relationship - fear of nothingness – the void – and of non-being. Disease and death are undeniably integral parts of human life. Yet when they manifest we are easily caught unprepared, under informed and under educated which causes gross stress and trauma.

To prepare for these, we need to learn how to skilfully face illness and passing away. All phenomena and experience rises and passes away - as does life itself – and we would be wise to accept, acknowledge and integrate this fact into our daily lives. The immense suffering that can arise when we face or deny issues relating to our mortality can be overwhelming and destabilizing to the psyche – therefore, this suffering is often a harbinger of a life being not fully lived. I would suggest that the only way to ameliorate this suffering – to facilitate a harmonious and fulfilled existence, is to cultivate a mindful life whilst simultaneously acknowledging and mindfully accepting death as a natural consequence of having lived. To accept death as a natural by product of life, one must be cognisant of

accommodating and cultivating the fact that we will complete the cycle and die. Essentially, if we do not wish to cause ourselves unnecessary suffering, we must come to terms with death as a natural process and the end outcome of life and the optimal way of doing this is through the cultivation of mindfulness. It is a well-known fact that mindfulness reduces suffering – it brings one back to the present moment, it calms the body and psyche, it reduces existential angst and it reduces death anxiety. Our fear of death can be dissolved through mindfulness. With death, we have no choice – we have little control. We cannot choose not to die and it is pointless railing against it. We can use mindfulness to accept this.

“Analysis of death is not for the sake of becoming fearful but to appreciate this precious lifetime.” ~ Dalai Lama

Although the concept of mindfulness is most firmly rooted in Buddhist psychology, it shares conceptual kinship with ideas advanced by a variety of philosophical and psychological traditions, including ancient Greek philosophy; phenomenology, existentialism, and naturalism in later Western European thought; and transcendentalism and humanism in America. That this mode of being has been commonly described suggests its centrality to the human experience, and indeed, mindfulness is rooted in the fundamental activities of consciousness: attention and³

awareness. Many philosophical, spiritual, and psychological traditions emphasize the importance of the quality of consciousness for the maintenance and enhancement of well-being (Wilber, 2000).

Within Buddhist philosophy, the term mindfulness is an English translation of the Pali word *sati*. Pali was the language of Buddhist psychology 2500 years ago and mindfulness is the core teaching of this tradition. *Sati* connotes awareness, attention and remembering. What is awareness? Brown and Ryan (2003) define awareness and attention under the umbrella of consciousness: consciousness encompasses both awareness and attention. Awareness is the background 'radar' of consciousness, continually monitoring the inner and outer environment. One may be aware of stimuli without them being at the center of attention. Attention is a process of focusing conscious awareness, providing

heightened sensitivity to a limited range of experience. In actuality, awareness and attention are intertwined, such that attention continually pulls 'figures' out of the 'ground' of awareness, holding them focally for varying lengths of time (Germer: 2004). Mindfulness has received much attention in contemporary clinical and social psychology given its apparent benefits for behavior regulation, psychological health, and interpersonal relationships. Mindfulness is an exemplar of the experiential mode of conscious processing that concerns a receptive state of mind wherein attention, informed by awareness of present experience, simply observes what is taking place. Additionally, trait mindfulness involves a more frequent receptivity to internal and external stimuli as they occur, which contrasts with the conceptually driven mode of processing wherein occurrences are habitually filtered through appraisals, evaluations, and other forms of cognitive manipulation (Ryan et al: 2003).

Importantly, mindfulness differs from the two modes of processing described by Epstein (1994) - experiential processing, which is preconscious, automatic, and emotion-laden, and rational processing, which is logical and relatively affect-free. Brown and Ryan (2003) suggested that mindfulness is an important component of healthy self-regulation. In fact, they found that trait mindfulness was positively associated with autonomous self-regulation and congruence between implicit and explicit affect. In threatening situations, the receptive attention that characterises trait mindfulness is thought to facilitate exposure, or less defensive processing of threat and research suggests that mindfulness promotes desensitization and reduced emotional reactivity, greater tolerance of unpleasant states reduced habitual responding, and more adaptive responding in threatening social situations. Further, mindfulness has been shown to relate positively₄

to self-esteem and negatively to neuroticism (Brown & Ryan, 2003), which have been found to mitigate and enhance worldview defense. This theory and research on mindfulness argues for the value of an observant stance toward experience—that is, a self-asker ~ rather than an agent of reflexive cognition in which attention informs thoughts about the self, as in self-awareness theories. Indeed, Brown and Ryan (2003) found that trait mindfulness shares little variance with such constructs as private self-consciousness and reflection.

Mind-body approaches such as mindfulness and meditation are being increasingly incorporated into health care. Despite a growing interest in mindfulness, its Buddhist philosophical underpinnings have remained primarily unexplored in nursing practice research (Bruce: 2002). Without an awareness of the nondualistic assumptions embedded in mindfulness and Buddhism, interpretations of this Eastern practice are limited. Death, re-interpreted in the Buddhist sense of the participants, is constructed as momentary experience occurring each mind-moment. Life is not necessarily privileged over death, but rather is seen as a doubling of living/dying intertwining within momentary awareness. A re-configuring of living/dying is suggested that differs from Western perspectives where 'living' holds hegemony over 'dying'. Death is situated in the midst of liminal spaces of being/not being and ubiquitous change while mindfulness meditation is seen as a parallel process providing an embodied realization of this transience (Bruce).

Because mindfulness affords receptive, unbiased processing of threat, it can be envisaged that cultivation of mindfulness would moderate defensive responses to death and dying. Regardless of the illness, the state of being, the mode of dying, mindfulness practice can alleviate distress and despair. Being mindful allows an individual to fully process experience, to be more of an observer of the body, to bear witness to uncertainty and change - as reflected in perhaps longer consideration of death and therefore less suppression of death thoughts. The side benefits of mindful practice are that neuroticism is reduced and openness to experience is increased and this is positively related to greater feelings of self esteem, self acceptance and acceptance of presenting circumstances. Meditation can also be utilised with mindfulness as when we have the opportunity to sit over sustained periods of time with closed eyes, in a silent place, and sharpen concentration on one thing (such as the breath), the mind becomes like a microscope and can detect minute mental activity. When we become aware of this activity and develop insight into our processes we are then able to develop mind discipline and prevent our mind running away with story making and fear mongering. It follows that, the more we refine our practice of mindfulness and/or

meditation, the more our stress is reduced and the more able we are to ameliorate troublesome symptoms, discomfort, reduce pain and distress.

These measures we can take to alleviate suffering in life and in death help us to tune into the sensory experience of cultivating mindfulness and joy. When we invest our total attention in what we see, smell, taste, hear, or feel, we can transcend the stories whirling in our minds and lessen the intensity of physical pain. This phenomenon has been observed in numerous scientific studies, including landmark research by Jon Kabat-Zinn, which showed that mindfulness-based stress reduction aided in lowering present-moment pain, negative body image, inhibition of activity by pain, mood disturbance, and psychological symptomatology, including anxiety and depression.

‘If all of us would make an all-out effort to contemplate our own death, to deal with our anxieties surrounding the concept of our death . . . perhaps there could be less destructiveness around us.’ ~ Ku“bler-Ross: 1969

Cultural myths dictate that dying is bad, requires professional intervention, and that life should be prolonged at all costs. This is problematic because these perspectives often result in negative experiences with death and dying. But a death reengagement movement is surging in the West today, led by individuals who believe we can dismantle the problematic cultural stories. The movement’s mission is to catalyse a cultural paradigm shift by engaging in thoughtful conversations and reclaiming practices and perspectives often missing from our own and others’ experiences. It encourages people to consider how, instead of demeaning and disconnecting from death, we can recognise and re-engage with it. Whilst we cannot eliminate all of the suffering involved in dying or the eventuality of death, we can mindfully acknowledge our fears, our denial and our despair. We can be at peace with everything that arises. Mindfulness helps us do that. Everything is impermanent and often there is more pain in life than in death. Emotional pain can be more excruciating and harder to live with than physical pain – hence our suicide rates. Everything is always changing - for the better and for the worse. Equanimity, which is the beautiful outcome of a sustained cultivation of mindfulness practice, is our saviour, a state in which we can be okay with whatever arises. Spirituality also helps lessen suffering for many people. Taking comfort in the notion that we are all connected can mediate existential angst and a sense of interconnectedness can help a dying person feel less isolated in their dying.

Ku“bler-Ross (1969) asserted that a receptive consideration of death may reduce₆

interpersonal strife. Defensive responding to our mortality appears to depend on the extent to which people mindfully consider their own death. These findings are encouraging not only because they point to an inner resource that was found to reduce proximal and distal defense but also because mindfulness can be cultivated (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). A sustainable mindfulness practice throughout life changes an individual's relationship to his or her particular form of suffering. Obviously, if we are less upset by events in our lives our suffering will decrease. We become less disturbed by unpleasant experiences even when the body and mind instinctively react to painful experiences. Mindfulness is a skill that allows us to be less reactive to what is happening in the moment. It is a way of relating to all experience— positive, negative and neutral—such that our overall suffering is reduced and our sense of well-being increases. To be mindful is to wake up, to recognise what is happening in the present moment. These perspectives may help us go beyond dualistic views and provide guidance for abiding in the midst of suffering that may be beyond words. Further inquiry into non-conceptual awareness and its relationship with health and wellness is needed. There is scant research on what constitutes a mindful death in a way that informs an equanimous approach throughout life and throughout the dying process and into death. There is a multitude of research on mindfulness and a multitude on death and dying but the body of research incorporating and integrating both is open to further enquiry.

Our fear of death can be dissolved through mindfulness
~ Dalai Lama

APPENDIX A

Maraṇasati (mindfulness of death, death awareness) is a Buddhist meditation practice that uses various visualisation and contemplation techniques to meditate on the nature of death.

About Mindfulness on Death Meditation

The Maranānussati bhāvanā is a contemplation on death. The Buddha once said that footprints of all animals, despite them being two-legged, four-legged or multi-legged, could be placed within the footprint of an elephant. Similarly, all wholesome qualities can be assembled under “Appamādo”, that is heedfulness or diligence. The Buddha said that a disciple should be heedful in order to generate merit and to end suffering. The Buddha said, “mā bhikkhave punnānaṃ bhāyitta,” monks, you should not

be afraid of generating merit; “kattabbam kusalam bahum,” do wholesome deeds frequently. The merits we gather in this life will ripen in lives to come. In this life, we are born as human beings because of merit from past lives. To be born in the human world and in the heavenly world, one needs merit. Nonetheless, merit generates the right conditions for the realization of noble Dhamma. The Buddha said that he would never, not for a moment, appreciate the continuation of this cycle of rebirth. Therefore, the disciple should be heedful to end suffering.

Many postpone practicing Dhamma because of their engagements of the mundane life. Ordinary human beings consider employment, housing and good education for their children as great challenges of life; but they are unable to recognise the grave crisis of the mankind; which are, aging, sickness and death. Many consider retirement is the best time to practice Dhamma; this is because they do not realize that death can occur at any moment, without warning. They are preoccupied with planning for the future and often die before realizing their dreams for the future. The Buddha said that wise people should practice mindfulness of death to develop heedfulness. One who practices mindfulness of death is keen to practice calming and insight meditations for the realization of the noble Dhamma.

APPENDIX B

Mindfulness of Death Meditation

All beings that are born are subject to death.

Beings in heaven, beings in the Brahma world, beings in the animal world, and beings in the planes of misery are subject to death.

No being escapes death. No one knows when and where death occurs.

Death comes in the womb. Death comes in infancy. Death comes in youth. Death comes in middle age. And death comes in old age. Death is independent from age.

No one predicts when, where, and how one will die.

Death comes to the rich. Death comes to the poor. Death comes to the learned. Death comes to the unlearned. Death comes to the highborn. Death comes to the lowborn. Death comes to the noble. Death comes to the ignoble. Death comes to the beautiful. Death comes to the ugly.

Death comes to the skilled; and death comes to the unskilled.

Death does not discriminate.

Death comes in the morning. Death comes in the day. Death comes in the evening. And death comes in the night. Men and women die independent of time.

Death occurs from drowning. Death occurs from fire. Death occurs from poisoning. Death occurs from sickness. Death occurs from earthquakes. Death occurs from flooding. Death

occurs from natural disasters. Death occurs from accidents. Death occurs from biting. Death occurs from callous actions. Death occurs from suffocation. Death occurs from choking. Death occurs from stumbling; and death occurs from the completion of lifespan.

Beings die in multitude of circumstances.

Death comes to a Supreme Buddha. Death comes to a Private Buddha. Death comes to an enlightened one. And death comes to those who are on the noble path.

Death comes closer as day and night pass.

One may die between an inhalation and an exhalation.

Death occurs in an instant.

All who are born inherit death.

Knowing this, I will engage in wholesome activities.

Knowing this, I will practice calm and insight meditation.

Knowing this, I will work to end suffering like one trying to put out a fire on their head.

REFERENCES

- Barbato, M. Midwifing Death; 2013
- Barbato, M. Caring for the Living and Dying; 2010
- Becker, E. The Denial of Death. Macmillan Publishing, New York; 1973
- Bruce, W.A. PhD Thesis - Abiding in Liminal Space(s): Inscribing Mindful Living/Dying With (in) End-of-Life Care. University of British Columbia; 2002
- De Beauvoir S. A Very Easy Death. O'Brian P, trans. New York, GP Putnam Sons; 1966
- Epstein, S. Integration of the Cognitive and Psychodynamic Unconscious. American Psychologist, Vol. 49 (8), August 709-724; 1994
- Germer, C. Ph.D. What Is Mindfulness? Insight Journal, 24-29, Fall; 2004
- Greenberg, J., Pyszczynski, T., Solomon, S., Simon, L. & Breus, M. Role of consciousness and accessibility of death-related thoughts in mortality salience effects. Journal of Personality & Social Psychology, Oct 67(4): 627-37; 1994
- Kissane, D.W. The Relief of Existential Suffering. Archives of Internal Medicine, 172 (19): 1501-1505; 2012
- Kubler-Ross, E. On Death and Dying. The Macmillan Company, New York; 1969
- Levine, S. Healing into Life and Death. Anchor Books, New York; 1989
- Levine, S. How to Live This Year as if it Were Your Last. Bell Tower, New York; 1997
- Jain, C.M. (Osho - Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh) The Art of Dying - Talks on Hasidism Puna, India; 1976
- Park, Y.C. MA Thesis - The Effect of Meditation on Death-Thought Accessibility and Worldview Defense in Response to Mortality Salience. University of Colorado Colorado Springs; 2016
- Ryan, R.M. with Niemiec, C.P., Brown, K.W., Kashdan, T.B., Cozzolino, P.J., Breen, W.E. & Levesque-Bristol, C.L. Being Present in the Face of Existential Threat: The Role of Trait Mindfulness in Reducing Defensive Responses to Mortality Salience. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Vol. 99, No.2, 344-365; 2010
- Schultz, D.M. M.A. Thesis - Effects of a Brief Mindfulness Induction on Death - Related Anxiety. The

University of Southern Mississippi; 2016

Solomon, S., Greenberg, J., & Pyszczynski, T. A terror management theory of social behaviour: The psychological functions of self-esteem and cultural worldviews. In M.P. Zanna (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 24, pp. 93–159). New York: Academic Press; (1991).

Wilber, K. (2000). *Integral Psychology: Consciousness, Spirit, Psychology, Therapy*. Shambhala, Boston; 2000

Yalom, I.D. *Existential Psychotherapy*. New York, New York: Basic Books; 1980

Yalom, I.D. *Staring at the Sun. Overcoming the Terror of Death*. Jossey-Bass. San Fransisco; 2008