

# MOTIVATION

teachings by  
**Sonia Moriceau**

**2004 - 2011**

## **DEDICATION**

To my main teachers

John Garrie Roshi, Namgyal Rinpoche and

Norbu Namkhai Rinpoche

who tirelessly shared their wisdom and compassion,  
and to the many students who attended the teachings.

A bow of deep gratitude for your support.

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## *Motivation*

We will start with adjusting our motivation. It is very important to state your aspiration, to have the bigger picture. Free of suffering for ourselves is the first step. But you have to fill your cup, so it overflows for all other beings – humans, animals, insects. The bigger view is ‘may I awaken speedily for the sake of all beings’. Spend a moment to touch on this aspiration for yourself, contact the feeling of this. The practice doesn’t ‘dead end’ at yourself, it doesn’t stop only with you. If you allow the practice to stop just for yourself, you are going to become quickly bored, lose interest. If you are losing interest, maybe you are not sufficiently focused on others. You have to state in your mind the intention that your practice will be for the benefit of all sentient beings. The mind state is the most important aspect; check from time to time throughout the day if you have this aspiration alive in your mind, or whether you are just going through the motions. When the going gets tough, make it your practice to support other beings, so your life is of service to other beings. You should welcome suffering, pain; you are going to become so wise, so compassionate – it is true! When you have an illness, an emotional upset, being aware of having this will make you more able to help other beings.

Listen with the divine ear to the texts:

*With the heartfelt desire and determination to attain enlightenment  
for the welfare of all living beings, who are more precious than a  
wish-fulfilling jewel for accomplishing the supreme goal,  
may I always cherish them and hold them dear.*

(Verse-1 of the ‘Eight verses for training the mind’ by Geshe Langri Tangpa)

*Cherishing and caring for others is the source of all happiness. Cherishing ourselves above others is the source of all suffering and negative conditions in this world. Therefore, our determination to attain enlightenment should always be motivated by our heart-felt desire to serve the welfare of all living beings. The attainment of enlightenment is the supreme goal. Our enlightenment comes from the cultivation of bodhicitta (the awakening mind of love, compassion, and wisdom). Bodhicitta arises from our deepest compassion. To develop this compassion and reach the supreme goal, we need others. In this way, all living beings are the principle source for our spiritual development and for accomplishing the supreme goal of enlightenment. In addition, at some time each of us has been, and will be, a source of great kindness and benefit for one another. The immense kindness of all living beings is integral to our own human existence. Considering this, we can understand how living beings are even more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel and that we should always cherish them and hold them dear.*

(Commentary on Verse-1 taken from [www.buddhadharma.org](http://www.buddhadharma.org))

I want to talk to you about *bodhicitta*. *Bodhi* means purified, *citta* means mind. So *bodhicitta* is the mind that is seeking to purify itself. What do you think that means, what do we need to purify? What are the three poisons? Attachment, aversion, and confusion; or, desire, hatred and delusion. And how do you do that? By paying attention to others, by serving others, putting others before you. ‘May I serve to be perfect, may I be perfect to serve’. So *bodhicitta* is the heartfelt desire, the drive to serve other beings. Cultivating *bodhicitta* means cultivating a mind of serving, of benefiting others.

There are two levels of *bodhicitta*. The first is the mundane or relative level, the level at which we operate. This is the kindness that you display every day. It is also the aspiration to offer any piece of happiness you have to the benefit of others. So I would like to ask you today, as part of your motivation, to reflect on your action and ask yourself ‘how is this benefiting other beings?’. ‘How are my actions in body, speech and mind benefiting other beings?’ It is an on-going contemplation. Begin to train your mind to cherishing others, rather than just cherishing yourself. Instead of

thinking ‘what can I get’, you train the mind to cherish others first. From ‘I want enlightenment’ for me, to wishing enlightenment for others first. It can be at the same time, of course; when you say ‘all beings’ that includes yourself.

Giving to others is the way of filling yourself up.

The second level of *bodhicitta* is how you vow to attain enlightenment in order to help other beings better. This is the ultimate level. You have to go to the first level first in order to go to the ultimate level. ‘May I serve to be perfect, may I be perfect to serve’. I want it to be very practical – so, your homework is ‘how can I benefit other beings?’ ‘How can my actions support other beings in body, in speech and in mind?’ It is asking you to turn your view to others first. This is how you are learning to purify your mind.

## *Contemplation of inter-being*

Purification – to be really purified we have to look at the practice of generosity. In order to let go of the unwholesome in body, speech and mind and to cultivate the wholesome, we have to focus on the first virtue, the *parami* of *dāna*. Step into the Zendo – have intention to practise for the benefit of all beings, not just for the self to get out of trouble.

Is ‘all beings’ too much? Think of all beings living at the Orchard –including birds, cats.... Dreariness, exhaustion will vanish at a flash because you are opening the heart, not just focusing on ‘me’. You have to set the condition before you step into the Zendo. Feel that you are nurturing this being so that you can help all sentient beings. Just this feeling fills you with energy. We are receiving a massive amount all the time, the product of so much input, attention. It is your responsibility, duty to pass it on. Your practice will never flourish if it is just focusing on yourself. If you really develop generosity towards other beings, you will receive from others beyond your imagination, in ways you could not have foreseen.

The *parami* of *dāna*, generosity: look at it as an opening, a letting go. To be more open and generous of mind, heart, body to all beings – not just loved ones, ones in authority, ones you hope to get something from. To all beings – why do we have to be generous and helpful to all? Contemplate how essential other beings are to you for survival in this life, you are totally dependent on other beings, we can do nothing on our own.

### *This is it* **INTER-BEING**

*There is a cloud floating on this sheet of paper that you are holding in your hand. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist.*

*If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either;*

*So the cloud and the paper inter-are.*

*If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper;*

*the paper and the sunshine inter-are.*

*And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger’s father and mother are in it too.*

*Looking even more deeply, we can see that we are in it too, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception.*

*So everything is in this sheet of paper. You cannot point out one thing that is not there – time, space, the Earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat.*

*Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper.*

*‘To be’ is ‘to inter-be’. You cannot just be by yourself, alone.*

*This sheet of paper is, because everything else is. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything else in the universe within it.*

Thich Nhat Hanh

From *Resurgence* No. 241, March-April 2007

This is the motivation to practise: because you are dependent on all beings, have been, and will be, forever. Take an event in your life that is still influencing you, still active in your life now, and try to find all the people that have in some way helped to bring about that event for you. The cushion of *chi* behind your back is all these beings that are supporting you, and you are taking them all with you. See the enormity of how you cannot do something just on your own. And *vice versa*, how you can make an impact on the lives of others. Every action you make, even private thoughts, has impact on all beings. The purpose of this contemplation is to feel over-whelmed. You cannot do anything just by yourself, you owe to countless numbers of others so why not practise for their benefit? Catch the mind when you are doing something just for you – can you open up? Every time you come into the Zendo, adjust your motivation: ‘I come to practise for the benefit of numberless beings’. If you step into the Zendo without having checked your motivation, give yourself permission to go out and enter again.

### ***Circle of Support***

Think of an event in your life, or a skill, and think of all the beings that were involved in taking you there. So I suggest you make a circle on a big piece of paper. Make a small circle in the centre; the small circle is an event, a skill, and you think back to all the people involved, all the beings, all the immense kindness – it goes on and on and on and on... At first you think of people you know, then of people you don't know. Write down just the names of the people, put them anywhere in the big circle. It is an exercise to train the mind to realise that each moment is supported by many, many beings.

Expand your mind so you see how you are supported. Recognise that your human existence is dependent on the kindness of others. Also think about how all of us being here on retreat is benefiting others. Think about this; when you take a walk after lunch, you think ‘how is this benefiting others?’ Namgyal Rinpoche used to say ‘the highest thought is how can I benefit another being?’. See how this is turning you inside out. Isn't it?

Q: *It's a tall order.*

A: Yes, that is why I used the words ‘adjusting the motivation’.

Q: *So when a selfish thought arises, how do you deal with it?*

A: For the moment, when grasping arises you notice it and soften; say ‘hi, you are back!’, ‘I know you!’, give it space, don't strangle it. Even your negative emotions can benefit others. If you know how to deal with a negative emotion, you are able to help others to do that also. There is a positive in experiencing a negative emotion!

Remember we are training the mind, cultivating the mind. It is not about success or failure. Don't feel discouraged, we are cultivating, we are taking care, and it takes time. Cultivating means tending, caring for, finding what it needs to grow. The journey of adjusting the aspiration to support all beings as part of your life, is the point of this exercise.

## *Contemplations on the Human Condition*

Contemplations are a tool for training the mind, turning the mind to awakening, to *dharma*, to wholesome thoughts. Ponder on the text, ask yourself questions and use the ability of the mind in a focused way.

### *Four thoughts that turn the mind to the Dharma*

#### *1. The preciousness of human birth*

*A favourable human birth, with its potential and leisures, is rare and difficult to obtain,  
yet easily lost.*

*Its attainment is much more meaningful than that of a wish-fulfilling gem.*

*If we do not use this opportunity to practice now, then all will be senselessly wasted.*

What is meant by a ‘favourable human birth?’ Consider the conditions that are needed to follow *dharma*, for example to be on this workshop? How many human beings have the leisure and resources to meet a teacher, to do any practice? How many humans have heard of *dharma* and are putting it into practice; cultivating compassion, loving-kindness rather than greed and aggression? In some countries women have no possibility of doing this practice. Contemplating this gives an incentive to spend more time in pursuit of the practice. Look at what potential and leisures humans have compared with animals. The potential may be there - in humans for example to learn about the *dharma* - but there may also be restrictions such as patriarchy, poverty, family circumstances. And consider what it would be like being a dog or a cat for a day?

‘*To attain*’ this precious existence: concentrate on the present rather than on past *karma*. Consider the favourable conditions in your past that moved you on towards what, where, you are now. Where did the skills, qualities come from?

Make a mandala on a big piece of paper and explore what the contemplation means for you; for example explore ‘favourable’, ‘potential’, ‘leisure’. Explore the influences in your life, and how you understand the favourable conditions you have had so far. This contemplation touches on the highest attainment. The highest, most precious gift is to meet the teaching because it gives us all the ‘skill and means’ to practise and become free from suffering, to cultivate loving kindness, joy and equanimity. The teaching leading to equanimity, to full awakening, is also the most precious means of helping others. Only humans can attain this, and it is rare because there are few humans compared to other sentient beings. Dig a hole in the earth outside and see how many creatures are in it, compared with humans in this room.

We humans have the potential to come to full awakening and to help other beings.

Recollect the beings that have inspired you to not give up on this precious human birth and on the practice, to strengthen your resolve. Explore this contemplation, persevere with it, don’t give up; it is analytical meditation. When you do this mental journey you will come to a place naturally of readiness to help other beings. It is fuel to support you to practise. If you meet resistance, frustration, rebellion, guilt, the feeling of ‘why me?’ – be upright, gentle and tender with it. There is a lot of energy in that resistance; listen to it but don’t give it more weight, don’t pull away from it and see what happens when that energy is released. We have to learn to meet our stories, our attitudes, weaknesses, defilements, with uprightness, gentleness and tenderness. Keep exploring it and the seed of awakening, of *bodhicitta* will come out: ‘yes, this is what I want to do with my life’. With the mandala, make it personal, it is about you, your potential and your leisures. Walking around this village where we live I became aware that in each family, among neighbours, there was suffering – cancer, depression, suicides, bankruptcy. In the face of deep suffering you have to be stronger, be upright, dig deep into the practice. There is a way, the teaching is very compassionate.

We have to make our practice more stable, so we can rely on it in times of difficulty. We don't know when tragedy, big disturbance, suffering is going to happen. Our practice has to be strong so we don't get overwhelmed when it comes suddenly.

## **2. Death and impermanence**

*All compounded existence is impermanent, flashing like lightning. Everything that comes into being is certain to pass away: the universe as outer aspect (context) and sentient beings as the inner (content). One day I too will die and there is no way to know exactly when; it could be years from now, it could be today. May I always bear in mind impermanence and death and live each moment fully in bright, non-clinging awareness.*

For contemplating impermanence, find an open space outside in nature, set yourself in front of a view and notice the changes taking place in that space: the passing movement of clouds, the changing movements of trees, of creatures passing by. Watch the movement of change in the outer for fifteen minutes. Then practise the same in witnessing the many thoughts that pass through your head, like the clouds. Observe the changes that are taking place within you, the inner, in terms of posture, sensations, the body, feelings.

Or, go for a long walk and everything you see, notice the impermanence of it. Come back from the walk and realise you are different, how you have changed from the person, from how you were when you set off; notice in what ways. With the letting go of the grasping after permanence, room is created for something to come in. Emptying and forming. The process of letting go is 'allowing in'. Do you want more love? Then let go of wanting to let it in.

Focus again on impermanence. Especially in times of illness, the process of dying is going on all the time. Study the signs of decay in your body and mind; these are signs of change. Be honest.

From impermanence we move on to on to death, *marana*. Recollect people you know who have died, from illness, accident, or someone with whom you have a special connection such as teachers. Recollect how they died, when, how old they were, how swift, how it was to be expected. Even the greatest teachers die. We postpone things, we are deceiving ourselves by assuming continuation, permanence. We need to respond and change priorities, allowing things and people who are no longer conducive in your life to fall away, let them go. You must practise now, to be prepared for death. Approach this practice from a place of urgency. Be ready, purify your state of being. Mind is what carries you over at the time of death. Stay in a state of non-clinging awareness, of loving-kindness towards self and others. Try to fall asleep tonight in a state of loving-kindness.

Do some walking meditation on a path the length of seventeen measured paces. With each step say one word in *Pali*: with the 1<sup>st</sup> step, *atthi* (bones), 2<sup>nd</sup> step, *mansam* (flesh and vital organs), and 3<sup>rd</sup> step *taco* (pronounced tajo - skin). Walking, say the three words step by step, then in reverse, *taco*, *mansam*, *atthi*, etc. Briefly imagining all or just some of your skeleton; your flesh, muscles and innards and then the skin. At the end of seventeen paces briefly pause, turn (not too slow), pause again and look at the path you have just come from, and do the same again. Do this walking practice for thirty minutes

This meditation on the body is loosening the sense of an 'independent', 'fixed' self.

## **3. Karma, cause and effect**

*If we want to know our past, we only need to look at how we are now, we are the product of what we have practised. If we want to know our future, we only need to look at what we are practising now. All that happens has results, it matters what we do. Recognising this, may I ever be watchful of how my body (actions), speech (what I say) and mind (thoughts) shape this moment and the next.*

*Karma* (Sanskrit) or *kamma* (Pali) literally means action or activity which is caused by wholesome or unwholesome volition. These actions of body, speech and mind that we perform every day shape the entirety of our life be it our environment, our occupations or our relationships. Have greater awareness of the actions of body, speech and mind, of what is wholesome and unwholesome; not the western connotations of good and bad. What supports the positive and what doesn't? Know what are conducive conditions for growth, in your environment, people you associate with, and occupation. You are invited to practise more selflessness instead of the unwholesome actions of body, speech and mind which are generating harm to other beings, and are all to do with taking from others. We need mindfulness, to check our intentions. The whole of this third contemplation is about being more selfless, about more caring for other beings. *'May all beings be well and happy'*. Look at the wholesome seeds in your life, how they were watered and the beings that helped you to water them.

*Karma* is not predestined, it is changeable, exhaustible, can be changed. *Karma* comes down to watching the mind, what is wholesome or unwholesome. The wholesome is any activity of body, speech and mind which allows space for growth, for playfulness. The unwholesome is something that blocks that growth. There are people, environments, activities which support growth in you. Review your life situation, is this still wholesome, still supporting your growth, awakening? Sometimes we feel loyalty to what was so supportive but no longer is. Is this aspect still supporting my growth? Is it wholesome or unwholesome now? We need to update this, to let go if needed. Be aware of how your body, speech and mind shape this moment and the next. It comes down to intention. An action may appear wonderful but the intention was not so good. Where is the action coming from, what is the intention? There is an example given by the Buddha: a poor old woman who had nothing, she put her dirty sandals on the altar. The head monk said 'not on the altar!' The Buddha said 'yes, she has given all that she has'. Read your own mind, where you are coming from as you are acting, speaking. Adjust your motivation. We have to first be in a better position ourselves, but that is not enough; it has to overflow to other beings. Whatever good you have, whatever wholesome state you are in, share it. Countless numbers of beings in the past and the present are supportive of your actions now. Have the image of a cushion supporting the back: behind you are all the beings of the past and the present who have practiced with us in the Zendo. Take refuge in this sharing and back-up; it will change your life because you are supporting others, which is wholesome and it is an aspect of giving, of emptying; and you will get more and more back. Whatever you are doing in everyday life, consider 'could this action cause distress, harm, to another sentient being?' Even without any intention to hurt any sentient beings, be more watchful of how you are shaping yours and others' environment by your actions now.

#### 4. *Samsāra* - cyclic existence

*It is not easy to endure the ever-changing circumstances in nature and in life. Getting what we don't want, wanting what we don't get, is suffering. We are easily seduced by the appearances of happiness which prove only fickle and ever elusive, yet in our blindness we remain attached.*

*Recognising this, may I practise letting go and come to live more peacefully in the present moment.*

*Samsāra* means "perpetual wandering", the continuous process of ever again and again.

There are three types of suffering, dukkha or un-satisfactoriness:

1. dukkha of misery, pain, or the suffering of suffering. This relates to our experience of physical and mental pain which are an un-avoidable fact of our human existence
2. dukkha associated with change, impermanence. *'we are easily seduced by the appearances of happiness which prove only fickle and ever elusive'* What starts off nice can turn not so, can become nasty. Love affairs can go wrong. *'the ever-changing circumstances in nature and in life'*

3. dukkha of compounded phenomena, of pervasive conditions. The cause of suffering lies within our own un-purified aggregates' – the five groupings of clinging.<sup>1</sup> The impurities or 'poisons' are wanting (attachment), pushing away (aversion) and confusion.

Dukkha, un-satisfactoriness breeds a sense of uneasiness, no peace; restlessness within, a deep sense of dissatisfaction. This deep internal unrest is good because it makes you search for the path to enlightenment. That is what takes people to the practice. 'Renunciation of *samsāra*' really means generating the mind of enlightenment, *bodhicitta*, to reduce not just our own suffering but that of all other beings.

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<sup>1</sup> The five aggregates of clinging are: body, feelings, perception, mental formations, consciousness

## *Nine Contemplations on Death*

In our culture death is seen as a morbid subject to be denied or avoided. There is the sense of having failed, that this should not happen. Yet we know that one-day we too will pass away. Drawing from the nine contemplations on death and impermanence we practise ‘dying’, letting go, loosening our grip on self and its many stories. Leaving fear behind we come to see that death and impermanence direct us to life, to living each moment with clear awareness and tenderness.

There are four aspects in each of the contemplations, the outer, the inner, the secret and the most secret. The text of the contemplation is the outer aspect. You ponder on the text, make associations, connections which leads you to the inner experience. If you go deeper into the whole contemplation this brings you to the intuitive level. This in turn leads you to the secret level, the more intuitive. And then something begins to shift.

To do these contemplations you will need to be not so busy, but quiet.

If you want to practise dying, you need to practise being totally present at the end of the out-breath. Pay attention to being totally present at the end of each activity, leaving the Zendo, putting your coat on. Just be present, just being there at the end of the activity. Mentally say ‘emptying’ – not holding, emptying, not planning the next move. Do it with the movement of the body, the activity of the body, first, and then the mind later. Eventually you notice the end of a thought, emptying; no more, emptying. Falling in the gap basically. This is what I mean by ‘in the sitting there is just the sitting, in the walking there is just the walking, in the eating there is just the eating, in the scratching there is just the scratching, in the thinking is just the thinking’.

I want to talk about the spirit of the contemplation, how you approach it. You choose a time when you want to explore the contemplation for yourself and you have to set up a space in yourself where you feel happy, feel good. So you could practise anything that puts you in a good space before you do the contemplation; it doesn’t have to be in the Zendo. You read the contemplation for yourself, say the contemplation three times slowly, and you wait for any associations to come through. After each contemplation do a short walking practice to allow the contemplation to settle, to interpret. When you are walking don’t think of the contemplation, just wait, some feeling will come through. If you can do the walking for twenty minutes.

It is very important to train the mind to stay with one contemplation at a time. There can be a tendency, if you find the work too challenging, to find your mind wandering away, you get distracted, so bring the mind back to the contemplation. If you want, you can draw the information, the impressions that you get through the contemplation.

### *FIRST CONTEMPLATION*

***All of us will die soon or later.***

*Death is inevitable; no-one is exempt.*

*Holding this thought in mind, I abide in breath.*

Go deep into this contemplation and make a list of people you know, who were special to you, important to you, that have died. Recall their fame, their youth, their fortune, even if they were spiritually very advanced, they still died. The idea is to spend some time allowing associations to come through. As you make your list you feel what your response to it is.

Do the same with people you know that are still alive and imagine that they will die too.

The facts stated here are not new to you, something that you know about, but there is a difference between knowing ‘about’ and really knowing death, knowing it in your bones.

We may have an idea that a famous teacher should not die and when it comes you feel ‘why him?’ ‘why her?’ Despite their quality, their goodness, they still die. So you spend some time reflecting on this for yourself. Choose people who are important to you, you feel close to. So for example for British people it may be Princess Diana, reflect on who she was, what she had, and she still died. You may think if you practise well you will not die, or if I spend more time on my cushion I may die but not yet.

Before you contemplate, focus on the breathing, on the spine, as we do with sitting. Allow some space in your mind for associations to come through. Notice if your mind becomes hard, becomes closed, resistant, and go back again, to be able to study again. This contemplation on death is very much feedback on our life now, on what in awareness. It is not something that is obvious, it is very subtle. You can imagine at some point your mind will get frightened and want to move on to something else. But train the mind to come back, to stay with just one contemplation. At the first stage you may find that the mind gets busy, then you do some walking practice for it to become quieter and quieter.

### SECOND CONTEMPLATION

#### ***My life-span is ever decreasing.***

*The human life-span is ever decreasing, each breath brings us closer to death. Holding this thought in mind, I delve deeply into this truth.*

It is very important when you read this for yourself to be quiet, just see what arises and at some point there will be a feeling, a deeper connection with this truth. And then you can study the association you see – with each birthday I am closer to death – and see what arises. There is no way of avoiding death, we are moving, galloping, towards it. The point is that the movement towards this moment of death cannot be stopped and yet you have life all the time. So every thought, each day, each season, each action, each plan you have for the future – you think, maybe!

Relate it more to yourself. In terms of this second contemplation, you can see it in terms of ageing, not death. Notice the changes in your body that have happened in the last year, since last week, since yesterday and make a list of those changes.

So you spend some time with the contemplation, making associations, then do some walking practice.

### THIRD CONTEMPLATION

#### ***Death comes whether or not I am prepared.***

*Death will indeed come, whether we are prepared or not.  
Holding this thought in mind, I enter fully in the body of life.*

Ask yourself what does it mean to be prepared? Are you prepared now? How do you understand the words to prepare yourself for death? It is a choice, the more you focus on ‘now’, the naming, coming back to that space, the more you will be prepared. The most important thing is preparing the mind, so you need to reflect on what qualities you need to cultivate, and what it is you need to let go of, in terms of tendencies, habits. It is said that at the moment of death what you have practised most will come through. So if in your life you have practised anger and sometimes been in loving-kindness, it will be the anger that will come through. If you are most of the time in loving-kindness and sometimes in anger, then the loving-kindness will take you through. If most of your life you have practised sometimes generosity but mostly holding on, then that is what will come through. You need to know what you are practising now in your life. What is the percentage of the wholesome and what of the unwholesome? There is no certainty about how we are going to die, it

can be in a very confusing, a very traumatic situation. So what you have practised will come through and help you.

At the end of each out-breath there is a gap, a meeting with the moment of dying. These contemplations very much help you to go deeper into this truth. At the end of each activity, every day, every moment, it is a sort of dying, and you go on with the next.

If something feels too much you leave it aside and return later. In a monastery this is what you do every day or so. If you start feeling upset, do something you feel happy with. Nature is very good to be with, with beautiful flowers, the birdsong. I want you to have enough energy to be able to attend to the contemplation so it is not the time to be spending the day upset. You are doing something very worthwhile, even if it is very emotional.

#### *FOURTH CONTEMPLATION*

##### ***My life-span is not fixed.***

*Human life expectancy is uncertain; death can come at any time.*

*Holding this thought in mind I am attentive to each moment.*

So this is very clear again, the point of death is uncertain. We can fantasise about how much time we have left but the moment of death is uncertain, it could be today, tomorrow; as you eat your breakfast, as you sit in meditation. You need to ponder on this fact. Imagine that in many years to come you are not there anymore. It brings a sense of urgency to your life. If you have ten years you have more time, there is not so much sense of urgency for attending to the practice. But if it is tomorrow, you need to know there is not much time left.

Think about people you know who died and ask yourself if they knew they would die that particular day. A son of someone I know, said 'I'm going out now Mummy, will you still be around when I come back? She replied 'I don't know'. She knew she was dying but she didn't know when. The point of this contemplation is the timing is unknown. I would like you to create for yourself a short ritual that you do once a day, every day, that will remind you that death can come at any time, in order to appreciate every day of your life. It needs to be short, very brief. I would like you to imagine a sentence to whisper to someone inviting them to remember that death will come, that you don't know when you are going to die. Not a long story, just a few words. Although we know that we are going to die, we don't act as if we know it. We need to remember and to live, so if you remember you live more in the present moment. You can whisper in your ear, in each other's ear: *momento mori*, remember death, when you are queuing, washing up. This is the ritual of some Christian monks, to say *momento mori* in each other's ear.

The *Pali* word for death is *marana*. But you can create your own ritual.

#### *FIFTH CONTEMPLATION*

##### ***Death has many causes.***

*There are many causes of death, even habits and desires are precipitants.*

*Holding this thought in mind, I consider the endless possibilities.*

What you have to do here, is to make a long, long list of all the possibilities, the manner in which someone can die. How can one die, the causes of death? All this information is not new to you. What is new is that you have to go deeper, deep into it, to really appreciate the different possibilities. You need to come to this shift of awareness.

This is quite a powerful contemplation, to imagine the endless possibilities of the causes of death. I encourage you to explore this thoroughly, it will show what your fantasy is about death, and about life also.

### *SIXTH CONTEMPLATION*

#### ***My body is fragile and vulnerable.***

*The human body is fragile and vulnerable; my life hangs by a breath.*

*Holding this thought in mind, I attend as I inhale and exhale.*

Here you need to focus on the fragility of life, how it can be quickly taken away from you. Consider what happens after the out-breath if you cannot breathe in again. It takes us back to the practice of paying attention to the breathing to the out-breath, the space at the end of the out-breath. You can practise falling asleep on the out-breath. Try it!

Follow the same structure as mentioned before, spending some time contemplating and then you do the walking practice. Try to stay with just the contemplation you are studying at the time. Don't go back to other contemplations, into other stories, other associations. That way you will have a lot of clarity of thought.

It is a big challenge to live our life as if this moment will be my only moment, the last one. Each meeting, each sitting could be our last one.

### *SEVENTH CONTEMPLATION*

#### ***My material resources will be of no use to me.***

*At the time of death, material resources are of no use.*

*Holding this thought in mind, I invest whole-heartedly in practice.*

I think it would be good for you to contemplate that you have to let go of your most precious things, art works, a *Buddha* statue, your notes' book. Anything that is precious. Imagine them being distributed to your family and friends, to a charity shop, a car boot sale. Imagine your precious *Buddha* statue in a charity shop, being used as a door-stop. My beautiful white *Buddha* in the Shiatsu room was a door-stop in a charity shop when I found it. All the time and money you have spent gathering these things. If you lose something or it is stolen you are outraged, 'It is mine, give it back to me' and yet you are going to lose it all anyway. So now imagine walking in your house, looking at your objects and knowing that you are going to lose them all at some point. I find it interesting that we tie our identity so much in objects. It is not the amount that we have with their value in money, it is our attachment to it. Notice how much identity is caught up with possessions and how much time is spent with looking after them, your house, the Zendo. It is very interesting, when you go to a charity shop, auction room, jumble sale, these objects to you are indifferent but they used to belong to someone.

So the point of this contemplation is to invest more in the practice, not to invest in things that you are going to lose anyway. To invest your money, your time in the practice, this will take you further for sure.

*EIGHTH CONTEMPLATION****My loved ones cannot save me.***

*Our loved ones cannot keep us from death; there is no delaying its advent.  
Holding this thought in mind, I exercise non-grasping.*

With this contemplation you need to touch how powerless you have felt in the face of someone dying. You didn't want this person to die but you could not do anything about it. You can make it a bit more comfortable for the person dying, for sure, but you cannot stop it from happening. No matter how skilled you are, how kind, how present you are with them at the time, still it cannot be stopped. So what can you do? Letting them go, not clinging on, to be more spacious, otherwise you can make it more difficult for the dying person to pass away. Maybe you can practise this with an animal, your favourite cat or dog, practise being more spacious, non-grasping. You can help someone with paying attention to their breathing – breathing in, breathing out. It is also important not to be indifference, be sort of blasé about their death. Also contemplate that death is normal, it is not a failure as sometimes we approach it as if something wrong has happened, failed, life is cut short; 'he was a great practitioner, it should not have happened'. Death is natural, death will happen. Who knows by how many years we are prolonging our life by the practice we do now, but it will happen.

*NINTH CONTEMPLATION****My own body cannot help me when death comes.***

*The body cannot help us at death; it too will be lost at that moment.  
Holding this thought in mind, may I learn to let go.*

This invites us to contemplate on how much time and money we spend on the body, how much identity we have with the body, and yet we will lose it all. Contemplate on how much we are pre-occupied with how we look; am I thin enough, fat enough, fit enough? So look at the pre-occupation you have with your body, how much you identify with it. Through this contemplation we are looking for a shift in awareness, for less attachment to the body.

You need to look at how dependent we are, positively and negatively, on our body. It is our constant companion. So what sort of relationship do we want to have with this constant companion? We are not saying the body doesn't matter, but how does it matter? Go through the list on how much money you spend a year on your face, make-up, clothes, hair dye; come to a point where you can say 'do I really need these things?'

***Closing comments***

When you come on retreat, you expect some input, but the impact of what you receive will have its effect long after you have left – six months later. It would be wonderful if as a result of the practice we could relate to each other as if we were all dying, which we are, to give support, respect, because we don't know when we will see each other again. I feel this every time we meet, I may never see you again, so I try to give everything when we meet.

It is important to know how you carry on with this practice back at home. Have you any ideas, how to nurture it? You could every day take a contemplation to practise with, read it three times to yourself and then spend some time with it. It is very good to try to nurture this practice in small ways but also to read the whole nine contemplations together from time to time is very important; it is like a cycle.

In the space at the end of the out-breath, in the emptying there is no more holding onto the past, no more fabricating about the future, no more fantasising about the present. Where are you then?

I am sure that you will be stronger after this practice. I promise you more clarity in your life, more purpose, more commitment. And so we end by re-affirming our commitment to practise and to life with the Bodhisattva vows:

*However innumerable beings are, I vow to meet them with kindness and interest.  
However inexhaustible the sufferings are, I vow to touch them with patience and love.  
However immeasurable the Dharmas are, I vow to explore them deeply.  
However incomparable the mystery of inter-being, I vow to surrender to it freely.*

*From this day forth, with wisdom and compassion as my lamp and my staff,  
I dedicate all my life energies to the welfare of all beings.*

### ***Main sources***

Leaving Fear Behind, April 2010  
 Opening the Heart, November 2009  
 Calm Abiding and Insight, October 2007  
 Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind, September 2004

### ***Notes***

The intention has been to present Sonia's words as she spoke, to preserve the flavour and the spirit of her teaching. Anything else is in italics: contributions from students, texts, editing links, other languages (mainly *Pali*).

Only one significant aspect of the teaching has been omitted:

- instructions for body work exercises / movements, which are learned from demonstration and experience

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