

Mindfulness Worksheet - Impermanence

That everything in life arises, lasts for a while, and then dissipates is a foundational truth. Things are always in process and are constantly changing. Even if that change is so slow that we cannot perceive it in the present moment.

Forgetting that change is constant and all pervasive is the source of our pain and suffering.

We want the things that we like to stay the way they are and to stay with us, forever. We grasp on to our pleasurable experiences, chasing them anew as they come to a close. We expect the vegetables in our fridge to stay fresh. We expect that the things we own will never get old and break down. We expect the people we love will stay just as they are. We expect to conquer disease or aging in our own bodies, or in the bodies of those whom we love.

When these expectations are inevitably unmet, pain and suffering arises. We get angry, frustrated and upset.

We can strengthen our resilience when it comes to each of these small scale reminders of impermanence by wrestling with life's greatest teacher of impermanence, death itself.

In the Buddhist tradition, meditating on death is a foundational practice. By remembering that our own life is fragile, precious and limited, we allow ourselves to truly live.

The following is a brief version of a classic meditation.

A Meditation on Impermanence

- Sit comfortably in a quiet place
- Set your timer for 5, 10 or 15 minutes
- With your spine upright and your shoulders relaxed, close your eyes
- Draw your attention to the breath and settle in
- Silently say to yourself "my death is certain"
- Contemplate this. What does it feel like in your body, or in your breath, as you think about the fact that you will most certainly die someday?
- Silently say to yourself "the time of my death is uncertain"
- Contemplate this. Notice the response in your body and breath as you think about the fact that we can never know for sure when our time will be up. Like a strike of lightning, anything can happen at any time.
- Silently say to yourself "the only thing that can help me at the time of my death is my own mind"

- Notice what it feels like in your body and your breath as you realize that none of your friends or loved ones can accompany you at the time of death. Your belongings and your money won't be able to save you. The only thing that will be of use to you at that very personal time, will be the quality of your own mind.
- With the time that's left, reflect upon the opportunity you have to improve the quality of your mind right now. It's the only thing you have that can protect you from the pain of impermanence.

What Did You Notice?

- Describe your experience with the meditation in general
- Describe a time when something 'changed on you' and it caused you great pain
- How do you think acceptance of change can alleviate pain?
- Do you believe that your death is certain?
- Did you notice a particular reaction in your body or your breath as you contemplated this?
- Do you believe that the time of your death is uncertain?
- Have you ever unexpectedly lost someone or something? What did that feel like?
- Do you think you know how and when you and all your loved ones will someday die?
- How do you think your life would change if you truly believed the time of death was uncertain?
- Why can't your friends or family help you at the time of death? What does that mean?
- Why can't your belongings, or your money help you at the time of death? What does that mean?
- What do you think the ideal 'quality of mind' would be at the time of death?
- If you could die at any moment, how devoted should you be right now to practicing that quality of mind?
- Some say 'we cannot fully live until we embrace dying.' Describe why this might be true
- How could we transform our understanding of impermanence so that it's not something to fear, but something that frees us?

Review

Meditating on death can be a scary experience for some people. The point is not to make you feel bad, or to make you sad. Rather, reflecting upon death opens us to awareness of the preciousness of our current life.

When we embody the truth that all is impermanent, and that we'll never know when it's going to be lost, or when it's going to come to an end, we naturally develop a deep gratitude for our lives and all that we have right here and right now.

Rather than fear, we feel a sense of relief. We're no longer struggling against reality. There's nothing we can do to halt the flow of this great river of life, but we can learn to swim and float and play and feel free as we make our way downstream.