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# Constant Contemplation

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In the Aḍguttara Nikáya, the Buddha has said that there **are five subjects which should be contemplated over and over again** by men and women, by laymen as well as recluses.

The **first subject** for this constant contemplation is set out thus:-

“Old age can come upon me.”

The Buddha has explained that most persons behave as if old age is a condition that will never come upon them:-

He has said that they do so through thoughtlessness and also by being obsessed with the strength and pride of youth. At least the sight of an old person weighed down with the infirmities that old age brings with it should serve as a salutary warning to them.

Forewarned is forearmed.

To the young, however, the reaction on the sight of an old person is the thought “It is not I” “It is not I that am old”

The result is, that when at length old age does come upon them with its attendant infirmities, they are liable to be disillusioned and despondent; and not having made the most profitable use of their youth, with its health and strength, they will now be full of remorse.

It is only those who engage in the constant contemplation of the possibility of the approach of old age that will have no occasion for subsequent despondency and remorse. This is indeed a most useful

contemplation.

Remember it was the sight of an old man, the sight of a sick man and the sight of a dead man that influenced the young Prince Siddhartha, living in the lap of luxury, to renounce the lay life for that of an ascetic in order to find a cure for these ill of life.

The **second subject** for constant contemplation is the thought, “I am liable to disease.”

Disease is such a common feature in any stage of human life, often making its appearance, when it is least expected, that every one, young and old alike, should realize that it can come upon him at any time, however careful he may be about his health.

Indeed, forewarned is forearmed.

A visit to any hospital should bring to mind the various diseases to which the human flesh is heir.

But to the heedless man the only reaction is the thought “It is not I” “It is not I that am sick.” The false comfort that such a thought yields is dispelled when sooner or later disease visits him.

Then only will he be disillusioned. The same consequences which follow the neglect of the first contemplation will also follow the neglect of this second contemplation which is just as useful as the first contemplation.

The **third subject** for constant contemplation is the thought “I am liable to die.”

Just as many persons are heedless about the possible approach of old

age and disease, so also many persons are heedless about the possible approach of death.

Forewarned is forearmed.

It is only the wise and cautions few, who, in the midst of the pleasures and joys of life, are keenly aware that death is waiting round the corner, as it were, and can be expected to make its grim appearance at any moment.

Most persons are not a bit concerned about the possible approach of death, and in their folly they relegate death to a vague and distant future.

This heedlessness is reflected in the unrestrained manner in which they lead a hectic life of gratification of the senses, planning grandiose mundane schemes for the future, as if they are going to live for all time, little knowing that death can dash all their hopes to the ground and that death can put an end to their meaningless lives lacking serious and useful preparation for the life beyond.

The Buddha has said. This means that life is uncertain while death is certain.

The uncertainty of the duration of life has been compared to the position of a dew-drop on the tip of a blade of grass. Any moment the dew-drop may glide away.

It is the constant contemplation of the possibility of death at any moment that gives balance to an otherwise unbalanced life, that gives meaning to an otherwise meaningless life.

It is not for nothing that in the Mahá Vagga division of the Samyutta Nikáya the Buddha has said:-

“Monks, the idea of death if cultivated and made much of conduces to great results and great profit.”

Death is a great leveller. The thought of death helps to dispel all thoughts of pride and vanity. It can also dispel thoughts of passion and hatred.

Furthermore it energizes one to perform all one's duties and do all that is needful before it is too late. Hence has the Buddha said, “Máraóa-satimanuyutto satatam appamatto hoti.” This means that the constant mindfulness of death dispels delay and promotes diligence. It cannot be denied that this third subject for constant contemplation is most beneficial to man.

The **fourth subject** for constant contemplation is stated thus:-

“All things that are near and dear to me are subject to change and to separation.”

The heedless man living complacently when everything is going well with him, when everything that is near and dear to him continues to be so, disdains to give a thought to the possibility that conditions can change, that persons, who are near and dear to him may cease to be so and that such persons may be separated from him or may cease to live.

Not thinking, thus he lives on gladly, obsessed, as the Buddha remarks, with the pride of life. Not realizing that the all-powerful Law of Change can operate at any time in regard to any person, thing or condition he hugs, the fond delusion that he is one of Fortune's favourites.

Not being forewarned, he is not forearmed.

It is only sudden and unexpected changes for the worse or the shock of a separation from those near and dear to him that will bring disillusionment to him with sorrow and disappointment in its wake—a disillusionment which never could come to one who practises this most useful contemplation.

The **fifth subject** for constant contemplation is set out thus:-

“I am the result of my own deeds, heir to my deeds. Whatever good or bad I do, I shall become heir to it.”

This contemplation though stated at great length is nothing more than an affirmation of the Law of Karma.

As a man sows, so shall he reap.

If this idea is thoroughly ingrained in us by constant contemplation, we will not feel the sting of sorrow when losses disappointments, failures and all other forms of adversity occur, for we will know that they are the results of our own misdeeds in the past.

Forewarned is forearmed.

We will be able to accept these situations with calm resignation instead of fretting over them and making life unpleasant to ourselves and to others.

When once we know that there is no god or other external power arbitrarily conferring good and bad destinies to mankind but that we are the architects of our own destiny, we are immensely comforted in the thought that this is a changeable destiny—changeable by us only—and that by the performance of good and meritorious deeds, we can convert a bad destiny into a good

destiny.

This comforting thought will undoubtedly arise with the constant practice of this contemplation.

Friends, let us refine our lives and purify our lives by constant contemplation of these five subjects.