

The Transitoriness of Life and the Certainty of Death *by Vajradarshini*

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Talk given at Tiratanaloka Retreat Centre, 2005

Challenging material; Nagarjuna on the breath; life as precious and fragile; the structure of the talk

I drew the short straw! Actually I'm beginning to think maybe they're all short straws on this retreat! In our group people have found that reflecting on the precious human life has been quite difficult and quite challenging. In our team meeting yesterday when we were talking about this, we were saying it was supposed to be the easy bit, the uplifting bit at the beginning! So maybe it's all quite challenging in different ways. What I'm going to talk about is death and impermanence.

*Many things threaten life, which is even more ephemeral than a bubble full of air.
How amazing is the opportunity to exhale after inhaling, and to awake from sleep.*

This is Nāgārjuna. I really like that, particularly that last line, "How amazing is the opportunity to exhale after inhaling, and to awake from sleep." We take it so much for granted that after each breath there will be another breath, and that each time we go to sleep we will wake up again.

Because I've been thinking about this talk, and Dhammadinna's been talking about reflections on the precious human life, I think I've seen how closely they're connected and how much they go hand in hand. They only make sense together. I was thinking that in a way we only really experience life as being precious when we have a sense of it being quite fragile or frail. And by having that sense of it being fragile, we realise the preciousness of it. So they very much go hand in hand. What we're trying to do is have a heightened sense of both of those things, of the fragility of life and of the preciousness of life, as opposed to having a dull sense of both of those things. I know for me that dull sense is like, "Well, life's not so great anyway, so what if I die?" There's a dull sense of both, but what we're looking for is a heightened sense of both.

I'm going to talk about these reflections in this context. I'm going to talk about death in the context of these mind-turning reflections. What I've realised is that it's quite a particular reflection on death. It's not just a general musing on death. It's thinking about death in a certain way for certain reasons. So I'm going to talk a bit about that sort of reflection on death. I'm also going to talk a bit about my own experience since my dad died. My dad died at Christmas this year, quite unexpectedly, and I've thought quite a lot about death for the last nine months, so I'm going to bring in some of those things that I've been thinking about.

Dew in zen poetry; Issa the poet's story; Dogen's insight; dew and autumn; dew on the flower - which lasts longest? Dewfrost; dewdrops as tears; dew and the lakshanas

First of all I'm going to talk a little bit about dew drops. I'm going to talk about an image of impermanence from the Zen tradition and from Zen poetry. I'll start with a little poem.

The lakṣaṇas can cut like blades sometimes While the dew drop world is the dew drop world But yet, but yet

This is a poem by Issa, a Japanese poet who lived in the 18th century. He had a really difficult life. His mum died when he was very young, and he had a stepmother who made his life hell, so he left home as soon as he could and eventually he married when he was about 50 and he had four children and they all died in infancy. Then his wife died in childbirth. Then his house burnt down. Eventually he re-married when he was quite old and he had a daughter who lived, but she wasn't born until after his death. He died when he was 65. That is a little life story of Issa. If you read his poems, he just writes the most beautiful, simple, sad poetry. He has the quality of empathy. He often writes about things like flies, but with a huge amount of empathy, as if he's put himself in the fly's shoes, so to speak – flies don't really have shoes! But it's just beautiful, simple poetry filled with empathy.

*This world of dew is nothing but a world of dew
And yet, and yet.*

I'll come back to that in a minute, this 'world of dew'.

I was also reading a book about Dogen's poetry, and he's the same in that he uses this image of dew and dew drops. He lived in the 13th century and is one of our teachers on the refuge tree. His mother and father both died when he was quite young, and he had quite a strong insight as a very young boy into the whole of life being quite fragile, loss and grief. He decided to become a monk when he was about 14. He writes:

*Dew drops on a blade of grass
Having so little time before the sun rises.
Let not the autumn wind blow so quickly on the field.*

If you read this Zen poetry, this Japanese poetry, and you read about it, you realize there are a number of themes, which mean definite things and they are re-occurring. One is the seasons, and each season is a symbol for something else. It's interesting because we're in the season of death and impermanence, being autumn. Also apparently in this poetry, whenever dew appears as an image, it always means autumn, interestingly. It's like fleetingness, something disappearing in the dew.

There is the image of dew being an image of impermanence, an image of transience of

things. There's a little saying that goes, "Which will last longer, the master or his dwelling?" It's said to be like asking, "Which will last longer, the dew on the morning glory, or the morning glory itself?" We've got a morning glory here, and the flowers come out, and they don't last a day. They last about half a day. When we ask the question, which lasts longer, the dew or the morning glory, it's like maybe the dew will fade before the flower does, or maybe the flower will fade before the dew does, but either way by evening time they'll both be gone.

You also have another image to do with dew which is dew frost. I've just come across this idea of dew frost. If you go out very early in the morning on a morning – I don't know what weather conditions cause this but sometimes there's just lots of dew and it's very wet on misty mornings. If you go up by the reservoir where there are fences, they are full of cobwebs. Obviously they are there all the time, but you don't normally see them, but because they're covered in dew in this dew frost, you can see all these forms out in nature that you don't normally see. This dew frost is used as an image for things being insubstantial. It's as if we need to reflect that we are as insubstantial as that dew frost, those forms made of dew, of nothing, that will fade as the sun comes out.

In this poetry when he talks about the dew drop world, the image of dew drops is an image for tears, so it brings in the emotions that go with the reflections on impermanence and insubstantiality. That sort of reflection has got a certain kind of flavour and the flavour is sadness, so these dew drops represent tears. It's a kind of painfulness. It's quite interesting because it's the three *lakṣaṇas*: the dew is impermanence, the dew frost is insubstantiality, and the dew drops are painfulness, suffering, sadness.

Sadness and awakening - *sabi*; nothing beats real experience; being moved by impermanence; death as the ultimate koan

So you also see in this kind of poetry, e.g. if you're familiar with the poetry of Ryokan, there's quite a strong connection between sadness and awakening, so sadness is a definite flavour in this kind of poetry. That sadness is '*sabi*', for those of you who don't know that I talk about *wabi sabi*. The sad part of that is *sabi*, which is not an unpleasant sadness. It's just a sadness at the fleetingness of life. But in terms of Zen poetry, there's quite a strong connection between that feeling of sadness and insight.

I was struck by Dhammadinna talking about Keith Dowman saying nothing beats real experience. It's all very well to reflect on things or even sit in bed reading this lovely sad Zen poetry, but it's quite different to actually experiencing death or loss and the sadness that comes with that. There's quite a strong connection between real experience and reflection, because what we reflect on affects how we experience the world. How we experience the world will be reflected in our reflecting. They feed into each other. If it was the case that things would never die, they would lose their power to move us. We are only moved by the dew or the morning glories because they fade away and we too are

going to fade away. That's why we're moved by them. Because we reflect on those things and those things will fade away, we have to take in more that we will fade away. They feed into each other, our reflections and our experience.

It's a bit like death seems to be the ultimate *koan*. What particularly moves me about this Issa poem, *the lakṣaṇas seem to cut like blades sometimes*, is that the painfulness of existence, and yet he talks about it as a dewdrop world, this world of dew, this world of illusion that is also very really painful. For me that is a koan. How is it that this world is an illusion, and yet it's so real in terms of the painfulness of it?

There's a story about Marpa. His son dies and he's absolutely filled with grief at the loss of his son, and his disciples are quite shocked that he's grieving so much, and they say, "How come you're grieving so much, because you've taught us that everything is an illusion? How come you're grieving so much at the death of your son?" He says, "Yes, everything is an illusion, but the most painful illusion of all is the death of one's child." It's this koan that *saṃsāra* is a painful illusion. Because it is a koan, it keeps us reflecting on it. It's really hard, if we have some experience of death, not to keep on reflecting on it. It evokes really big questions. It's a time when you ask yourself really big questions. For that reason, it does take us deeper. The Buddha says, "Of all footprints, those of the elephant are the broadest and deepest. Of all meditations, that on impermanence is the strongest and most beneficial."

Death is certain; disassociating from your own death; Vajradarshini's death imagined; not being that significant - freedom in this

Coming on to this mind turning reflection on death and impermanence, what I'm going to talk about is three things: that death is certain, that the time of death is uncertain, and that at the time of death only the Dharma is of benefit. That's the kind of framework of this reflection.

First of all, death is certain. I will die and you will die. Everybody dies, even the Buddha died. This is quite hard to reflect on because we think, "Of course I know I will die." End of reflection. So what does it really mean to know that I will die? One of the things I was thinking about was that I think that I will die, but when I die it won't be me that dies. It'll be this old lady called Vajradarshini that I've distanced myself from. So we do think we will die, but because we've projected that person who is going to die into the future, we disassociate with that person who is going to die: it's not really us, it's that old lady Vajradarshini. That's one thing to think about, that when you die it will be you, with all your clothes and your things and your habits and so on. However you are then, when you do die, it won't be that different from how you are now. You can't really disassociate from it.

Then I was imagining taking myself out of this world. I was imagining, what if I did die? I was doing this on this retreat, what if I did die? What if I do die before the end of this talk, what will happen? I was thinking there would be a lot of grief if I died during this

talk! I'm pretty sure. There would probably be quite a big funeral, and people would do me proud. Then everybody would start sorting out my stuff, and somebody would have my computer – that was one of the first things I thought! And there would be a few things in my room that people would want to have, but most of it nobody would want because it would just be rubbish. They'd clear all my files off the computer. Somebody else would put an ad in Shabda saying, in the unfortunate event of Vajradarshini's death we are now looking for someone to replace her. And then people would start getting quite excited about this new person who had applied for my job, and somebody would say, "Oh maybe you could be the chairman now that Vajradarshini's dead." All my responsibilities would be taken over by somebody else. For a while people would be quite sad, and they'd sit around the table in the community and they'd say, "Can you remember that syrup pudding that Vajradarshini used to make?" And they might have a few tears. But then, after quite a short amount of time, hours would go by where nobody had even thought about me. Then there would be days go by, and I might be mentioned every now and again, every week or two, but mostly people would just be carrying on with their lives. It's quite a reflection really to think that we're not that significant. It's quite hard to take that in. It doesn't mean that we're not loved. It's that even for the people that really love us, we're not that significant. We're not insignificant, but we're not the centre of their world in the same way that we're the centre of our world. Hard to believe, I know!

Also it's quite a nice thought in a way, because you realize that everything would go on without you, so there's a certain amount of freedom in there. There's a certain amount of just knowing that you've got a choice about what you do. I've got a choice whether I'm here or not because if I died I would just be replaced, so it's not like Tiratanaloka would shut down. There's a freedom in realising we're not that significant: life goes on without us.

Imagined hierarchies of permanence; samsara is a disaster; Longchen Rabjam on death

Then there's the whole area of how permanent and how substantial we see things or experience things to be. We know that everything is impermanent, but we think that some things are more permanent than others. We think that we are quite high on the scale of permanence, and probably our families and friends. Other things, like the dew drops and so on, we know that they're impermanent. The other day I just got a pen out of my thing to write something, I got my pen out – which is a really horrible pen, actually! – and I just thought to myself I think my dad gave me this pen. I have a memory of in the conservatory where my parents lived. He didn't give it to me as a present – I just took it or he said, "Just take that pen," or whatever. I thought, "That is absolutely mad that this horrible disposable pen is still here and my dad isn't." If you had told me that at the time, it would be so hard to believe that my dad was less substantial or less permanent than this pen. This pen is supposed to be disposable. It's things like that and you think, "That's just not right that this pen is still here." We're so geared to not take in our own impermanence, our own fragility.

I was on an aeroplane once. I always think I might die when I'm on an aeroplane. I'm not particularly scared of flying, but it's just that you're completely out of control, and if something happened that would be it. I always like to sit next to somebody that I wouldn't mind dying sitting next to – I have this thought, "Oh no, I don't want to die sitting next to this person!" Anyway I was on this aeroplane and I just thought to myself, "What would happen if suddenly we realised we were going to die?" and I had this image of everybody would be running up and down the aisle, hysterically screaming, "We're all going to die! We're all going to die!" Then I thought, "Isn't it funny that we're not doing that already?" Isn't it funny that we're not running up and down the aisle of life, shouting, "Oh my god, we're all going to die!" Because it's only a matter of a slightly different time scale, but we don't realise. We listen to the news and hear about these disasters, but actually we are in a disaster. Saṁsāra is a disaster, and none of us are going to survive it in that sense, within saṁsāra. Not that I'm suggesting we all get hysterical.

I've got some quotes here that I got from Dhammadinna. This is one of them. Longchen Rabjang says,

With your heart, contemplate the certainty that all your relations and all your wealth will be as nothing, like a deserted city. Everything is impermanent, so be detached. With your heart, contemplate the inevitability of death. When it comes, your home and possessions, your friends and famous colleagues will not accompany you. Realize absolute truth.

The time of death is uncertain; near misses; provisional plans; Patrul Rinpoche on the nearness of death; not yet

The next of these reflections is that the time of death is uncertain. Death is certain but the time of death is uncertain. I was reading some poetry the other night and I came across a poem which I'm not going to read, but the idea of the poem was that one of these days is the anniversary of our death already. It just made me think, "What day is the anniversary of my death?" Each year we go round the calendar and go past the day, and that day is the anniversary of our death in time. It's things like that that help to make it feel a bit more real, that that's really going to happen.

Another thing that I've been thinking about recently is near misses and how difficult it is to experience a near miss as a near miss. I spilt my coffee in my bed the other morning. I have a little shelf by my bed and it's not really big enough for all the things I tend to put on there. It was first thing in the morning and I was a little bit sleepy. What I realized is that I've often nearly spilt my coffee. You know you put your coffee down and it goes whoa! like that, and that's a near miss. But sometimes very occasionally you don't catch it in time, and it's all spilt in your bed, and you've got to make more coffee, and take your duvet off and do all these things. In terms of the results of that, there's such a big difference between spilling your coffee and not spilling your coffee. In terms of the consequences there's such a big difference, and in terms of the action there's such a tiny

difference as to whether you catch your coffee or not. I don't know why, but every time I have a near miss with something, I just think it's really interesting because if it wasn't a near miss, if it was a miss, and that thing had happened, the consequences would be completely different and a whole chain of something would be set up. Our life is probably like that. We probably have loads of near misses, but we don't experience them necessarily as near misses, because we're still here and nothing has happened to us. We haven't spilt the coffee in a sense. But it's perhaps just by a very tiny thread that we've managed to hang on to our lives.

Any moment could be our last moment, and all the plans that we make are provisional plans. I used to go and see my nanny when she was still alive – she lived until she was well into her 80s - and I used to say, "I'll see you on Sunday," or something, and she always used to say, "Yes, God willing." I noticed that this happened as she got older more, and we'd talk about my brother's wedding, and she'd say, "Well, if I'm here then." I suppose it's quite a good thing to do.

Another reading I've got here is by Patrul Rimpoche, and it's about this as a practice. This, "Well, if I'm here then." Anything we plan to do is provisional, because we might not be here:

Meditate single-mindedly on death, all the time and in every circumstance. While standing up, sitting or lying down, tell yourself, This is my last act in this world and meditate upon it with utter conviction. On your way to wherever you might be going, say to yourself, "Maybe I will die there. There is no certainty I will ever come back." Wherever you are, you should wonder if this might be where you will die. At night when you lie down, ask yourself whether you might die in bed during the night, or whether you are sure if you are going to get up in the morning. When you rise, ask yourself whether you might die some time during the day. And reflect that there is no certainty at all that you will be going to bed during the evening. Meditate only on death, earnestly and from the core of your being. Meditate like the Kadampa Geshe of old, who were always thinking about death at every moment. At night they would turn their bowls upside down, which is only done when a person died. And thinking how the next day there might be no need to light a fire because they had died, they would never cover the embers for the night.

It's quite something, isn't it, that you don't keep your fire in over night because you really think that you might die in the night.

I was thinking how much we forward plan. I can tell you what I'm doing every day of 2006 pretty much, God willing! If I get to be there. But we don't know that we're going to be doing those things because it is all provisional. We have an idea that there is going to be some time later when we die, or some time later when our parents die, or other people die, but not yet.

I remember this thing 'not yet', and I think that's quite interesting as well. I have this quite strongly. I try to be prepared for things I know I have to face, but I have this 'not yet'. I'm willing to go there, to do whatever it is, but not yet. I know when my dad died, the thing I was most shocked by was that I was 37 and I'd thought about my parents dying and what that might feel like and how I might handle it, but I'd always thought I'd be in my 50s. Unconsciously obviously but I'd got it somewhere that I'd be in my 50s. And I was, like, I'm 37 and this is not right. This pen and me only being 37. We're prepared for something, but we've got a certain idea of how and when that's going to happen and actually we just don't know how and when that's going to happen.

At the time of death only the Dharma is of benefit; you go alone, unprepared, unfinished; dying with fearlessness; Thagme Zangpo on death and the Bodhisattva; reflection galvanizing practice - doubt as luxury; faith and the need for a refuge

The third of the reflections is 'at the time of death only the dharma is of benefit. All you take with you is the core of your being.' With my dad, I was shocked by that: not his watch, not his vest; he took nothing with him. You leave everything behind. You go completely alone. Nobody can go with you. You go mostly completely unprepared. It's not even like going on retreat or on holiday where you will perhaps finish things off: do the washing up before you go and do your laundry. Most of us probably there won't be time to finish anything off. You'll just go mid-life. When I was at my parents' house after my dad died, I was really... he's a gardener, and there's the greenhouse, and he's got his sweet peas ready to go in, and he'd got all these things that were half done. It seems so strange and unbelievable that you can be gone, and there's all these things that you'd thought you were going to carry on with. All your plans, I suppose. We don't have that chance to finish anything off. Nothing, nobody, will be of any use to us. All that will be of any use to us is how much of the Dharma we've really integrated into the core of our being: how much love we have, how much fearlessness we have, how much insight we have, is all that will be of any use to us. It's very difficult to know how much of all those things we do have.

You often hear about people who have practised the Dharma to varying extents and you hear about how they die and how they seem to die quite well, with quite a lot of fearlessness. I don't know how I would be if I was facing my own death at all, and I imagine that I would be really frightened. I was with my dad when he died, and although I was really, really upset, I had no fear. That was quite a shock to me, that I had no fear. It changed my idea about my own death. It's given me a bit more confidence in my own death, that maybe I have developed some level of fearlessness. Maybe we all have it, whether we practise or not, some level of fearlessness in the face of death. Maybe it's not as we would expect it to be. We can't under-appreciate the effects of our practice and think all those days when I didn't meditate, and my lack of metta. We can under-estimate our practice, and we might have a lot more of a resource there when we really need it than we think we have.

Togme Zangpo says:

We will be parted from close friends or close acquaintance. Our wealth and possessions, obtained with great effort, will be left behind. The guest house of our body must be left by its guest, the mind. Casting away thoughts concerned with this life only is a practice of the bodhisattvas.

‘Casting away thoughts concerned with this life only is a practice of the bodhisattvas’
– I’ll come back to that.

These reflections, that death is certain, that the time of death is uncertain, and that at the time of death only the Dharma is of benefit, they lead to decisions. They galvanize us. They motivate us. They lead to certain qualities. When we reflect that death is certain, that leads us to practise, which is a kind of feeling of conviction. We have a strong sense of conviction. So when push comes to shove, we realize we do believe in the Dharma. Often we’re not put in that kind of position. It makes you think doubt is a bit of a luxury. We’re often in a position where we can afford to doubt. When push comes to shove we realise the degree to which we do have conviction in the Dharma. The more we can take it in, that we know we will die, the more our faith will be strengthened. In knowing that we will die, we know that we need a refuge. I think we don’t always know that we need a refuge. When we have the need of a refuge what happens is there is a refuge there. We have an experience of the Three Refuges in some form or other because we really experience ourselves as in need of a refuge. I think often we don’t experience that strongly enough, ‘in need of a refuge’.

I did feel when my dad died that I had been practising for that moment in a funny sort of way. I hadn’t put two and two together before, but I had reflected on death, and it was quite interesting to reflect on what I had that other people didn’t have. It wasn’t very much. I didn’t feel that I had very much that other people didn’t have. I didn’t feel like I had more courage, more love, etc. than my brother, my mum, my sister in law, or other people who were around. I felt like that was drawn out of all of us. What I did have was some sort of framework where I could make sense to some extent of what was happening. I had some way of understanding what was happening with my dad dying, so that was quite interesting just to notice what I had, which wasn’t that much, but it made a difference in being able to take in his death.

Death and liberation from unfocussed practice; urgency; being in the moment; how do we want to spend our time? Killing time; Ezra Pound - "And the days are not full enough"

If we develop this certainty that we are going to die, one of the things that it does is it liberates us from unfocussed practice. It focuses the mind. When we’re quite close to death, whether it’s the prospect of our own death or the death of somebody else, it brings a certain clarity. Suddenly you are perfectly clear about what is important and

what isn't important, and you just want to do what is important. It brings this focus, this clarity.

Then when we reflect that the time of death is uncertain, that makes us think we want to practise now. It gives us this sense of urgency. I must practise, and I must practise now. There's not necessarily tomorrow. We've done all our forward planning, but we're not necessarily going to be here to see out those plans. It's worth thinking about, what does this mean in terms of being in the moment. It's something we can get the wrong end of the stick about this 'being in the moment' business. You can think that being in the moment means that you don't make any plans for the future, whereas it doesn't mean that. It means that we know that all plans are provisional. We're in the moment with our forward planning, knowing that all that forward planning is provisional, yet we still plan.

This sense of urgency is going to make us ask ourselves, how do we spend our time, and how do we want to spend our time.

One of the things I've done recently is I've given up watching rubbish films. I've just suddenly got this sense that life is too short to watch films that aren't really, really good. I still watch quite a lot films, but I only watch films that are really good. That's quite interesting, because I used to be in a sort of middle ground. I don't think I've ever watched awful films, but there used to be a middle ground of quite entertaining films, a way of killing a couple of hours. Sometimes I would quite fancy a film like that. But recently I've realised, I only want to watch good films. It's the idea of killing time. Other people might not experience this with the same amount of horror. Those word puzzles that you do – not sudoku, that's different, maybe, those word puzzles where you have to find the words and then you circle them – I have this sort of thing where when I see somebody doing them, it fills me with a sort of horror. They're not even challenging. It's just an idea of losing half an hour. What are we doing with our time?

There's a poem that often comes into my mind, and I can't remember who it's by. [Editor's note: the poem is by Ezra Pound, the epigraph to *Lustra*] It says,

*The days are not full enough
And the nights are not full enough
And life slips by like a field mouse
Not shaking the grass.*

I love the image of life being like a field mouse, running through the grass so fast that the grass doesn't even move, and that life is going that fast. Just to have this feeling that the days are not long enough and the nights are not long enough. Yet it also brings up the question, what does it mean to make the most of our lives? Life is certainly too short to waste it by being busy all the time. Making the most of our lives and the days not being long enough and the nights not being long enough isn't about how much we can cram into our precious opportunity of life. We develop a sense of urgency, which is a combination of energy being freed up, that aspect to urgency, but also a disciplined focus.

We know what we want to do with our time, even if we want to do nothing.

Practising purely - with Insight in mind; Buddhism is not being better at samsara; not relying on the material plane; Lama Guntang Konchdron on the Lord of Death

So then ‘at the time of death, only the Dharma is of benefit’. This leads us to ‘I must practise purely’. I wasn’t sure what this meant, ‘I must practise purely’. I thought about it, and maybe what it means is that I must practise with Insight in mind. I must practise with that big perspective, not just in order to be a little bit happier, in order to cope a little bit better with saṃsāra, in order to get on with people a bit better and so on. What I think it means to practise purely is to practise with Insight in mind, to practise in a way that changes us fundamentally in our deepest self. That deepest self is all that we’ve got at the time of death, so that needs to be changed. It’s not that we’re trying to fix saṃsāra. That’s a really easy mistake to make, to think that Going for Refuge and Buddhism is about being better at life or better at saṃsāra. It’s not, because saṃsāra is saṃsāra, and the only solution is to get out of it, to step outside of it, to see through it, whichever image we like to use.

One of the things we need to do is we need to rely on something other than the material plane. This has been in my mind quite a lot after my dad’s death, how much I rely on the material plane. This is quite a hard one for me, because I am quite ‘outer’. I don’t have a very strong inner life in a certain way – well I do, but I want to make things and I want things to be manifest. My practice has been to work. I like to make shrines, I like to make talks, to manifest something. The idea of actually relying on something that is non-material, where we sometimes go in our meditation, that there is another plane to existence, however we experience it, and that’s where we’ve got to put our reliance. We’ve got to start relying on that more than on the material plane – not that they’re separate.

I really don’t think I would be very good at being dead! I was having an anxiety about it yesterday. I don’t think I’d be very good at being dead, because there’s nothing to do (which I’m not very good at) and you have to go there on your own (which I’m not very good at) and I was thinking about how I’m not very good at solitary retreats. I’m better at people and doing things. Yesterday I was thinking that I must go on solitary and start practising because I don’t think I’d be very good. Given my experience of solitaries, I think it might be similar. You’ve not got any of your familiar stuff around you, you’re not at home. There are all these things about being dead that I don’t think I’d be very good at. In a way, we are practising for being dead, or for dying. Abandoning actions done solely for this life. Not that those things won’t have an effect in this life; if we develop mettā, develop fearlessness, and so on they will have an effect in this life. But it’s abandoning the actions that have an effect solely for this life that won’t have any effect on our core.

Another little quote by Lama Gunkan Konstron who says:

The Lord of Death, who dwells in the south, does not consider the state of your plan. You should speak with him. When he comes to call on you he will not ask whether you are young or old, high or low, rich or poor, ready or not. All are forced to go alone, leaving behind their unfinished works. The thread of life is suddenly broken, like a rope snapping under a heavy load. There is not time for plan-making. To die without spiritual knowledge is to die in pathetic helplessness

Other koans in the dewdrop world; Dennis Potter on being close to death - blossoms

Just to finish, just coming back to the koan of the dewdrop world, this world of dew, this illusory world which is at the same time very real to us and potentially very painful to us, and yet it's an illusion. Within this world, within this koan of life and death, we have another koan, which is, *How do we make the most of life without hanging on to it?* How do we neither waste time, nor resist the passing of time?

Just to finish I'm going to read a little quote from Dennis Potter, who wrote this when he was dying of cancer. It's to do with the perspective that you get when you're close to death, either your own death or somebody else's death. You get a different kind of perspective. In a way we're looking to get that different kind of perspective, which is why we're reflecting about death and impermanence.

Blossom is out in full now. It's plum tree. It looks like apple blossom but it's white. It's the whitest, frothiest, blossomest blossom that ever could be, and I can see it. Things are both more trivial than they ever were, and more important than they ever were and the difference between the trivial and the important doesn't seem to matter, but the now-ness of everything is absolutely wondrous.