

Practicing Death

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Our vision for the Pod work

Our pod is a passionate, open and connected group, that takes risks and shows vulnerability that trusts in the bigger picture and has faith that through balance between structure and flow we lean into an edgy and challenging subject with fun and joy through conflict from which creativity emerges.

This quote was written at the beginning of our pod group in a collective creation workshop following the listening of the video “A Piano Played by Five Pianists at Once (First Attempt)”

What does it mean to Practice Death?

As Ken Wilber puts it:

“As the mystics put it, ‘If you die before you die, then when you die, you won’t die.’ In other words, if right now you die to the separate-self sense, and discover instead your real Self which is the entire Kosmos at large, then the death of this particular bodymind is but a leaf falling from the eternal tree that you are.

Meditation is to practice that death right now, and right now, and right now, by resting in the timeless Witness and dis-identifying with the finite, objective, mortal self that can be seen as an object. In the empty Witness, in the great Unborn, there is no death—not because you live forever in time—you will not—but because you discover the timelessness of this eternal moment, which never enters the stream of time in the first place. When you are resting in the great Unborn, standing free as the empty Witness, death changes nothing essential.”

Practicing death as a way of more fully living

At the beginning of our time together we took turns facilitating to explore what was emerging for our group, what we felt passionate about, and we organically came to the

topic around death. Each of us connected with the topic from a personal 1st person perspective and then we began to connect with the topic through the 2nd person perspective, the 'we' space, as we shared our personal experiences and stories. We had many touching and deeply connecting conversations and we all came to the topic from a different angle. We held the inquiry of what the value of this topic was to being an integral facilitator... we shared that by practicing death, we are able to more fully live and be more clear about how we want to live our life. We are also able to strengthen our letting go and surrender muscles through this practice which helps us work with others in the same capacity as facilitators. As we practice death we are actually practicing life because to practice death allows you to awaken more fully to your life and to be able to love more freely. And we are able to help others navigate the territory not only of surrender and letting go but also how to live more fully. We can see more and feel more and have access to more of the life force that comes up in the groups that we are facilitating.

Our exploration/ practice around the topic:

Aithan

“Practice Death” has been written on a sticky note and placed on the front cover of a book I’ve been reading for the past months working with our Pod on the subject. It is not an unfamiliar subject, but has taken on a remarkable new range of opportunity and discovery thanks to the group and our work together and individually.

As an artist, practicing death is quite familiar and in fact common. My understanding of the act of creation itself begins with destruction - to create something new or novel often means the death or destruction of some set of rules or familiarity. Death, or at least some mourning can appear when departing from a journey, selling a piece you’ve nurtured intimately for some years, or through the act of covering up portion of a canvas that has been worked on for months and may be a satisfying passage either as sacrifice for a larger benefit of the whole or with some potential direction that may lead to greater results. In these ways, I have been actively practicing death for over 15 years from the “I” and the “we” perspective of understanding death as a part of its greater surrounding and also at times, without knowing the reference, understood death as an ‘object’ that can be used creatively at a specific time and place for greater good - though knowing what I do now about development, I certainly have more to go integrating it into my studio practice. However, the ‘Practice Death’ sticky note I placed on my book was about a new dimension for me, and even though I did not have a specific set of actions, my intention was to explore the practice of death in ways that would hopefully allow me to contribute to the Pod conversation and my ongoing development as a facilitator in deeper ways.

One significant moment in practice happened as I was leaving for a work trip. I turned to my wife while walking out the door and in my goodbye said that I knew I’d be returning safely from NY as always, but just in case something happened and I didn’t, to please make sure our daughter knew that she was the most important thing in my life. It came out comfortably and almost nonchalantly despite its intention because I had thought hard about it the night before. As part of my preparation, I had imagined what would happen if I never came back and what the most important things were to make sure I had done or said. My wife did not receive it comfortably, her shoulders tightened and eyes opened in surprise and then I could see the gravity of the message weighing her. Her pause reminded me and we talked and cried together about it. What struck me was the clarity about life, and not just about my love for my daughter and what I believe is her strongest need at almost 2 years old, to feel and know being loved, but also clarity about how precious the moments are and how abruptly they could end. Furthermore, the practice in the moment, was less about what I needed to achieve or a mark I needed to meet but the ongoing connections and strengthening bonds we make with each other in the moments we are together, and this includes the connection to my wife that deepened in the moment I was practicing death.

When I presented the experience to our Pod that week, the group responded

Christian	<p>Exploring death and especially practicing death was humbling for me.</p> <p>My father used to say, « The cemetery is full of irreplaceable people ». I've been using that same sentence for years speaking of others, but then it « really » hits me that the sentence also applies to me. At first it was scary. « Is what I am doing worth something »? « Do I matter »? But then I found the answer in love for myself. Life is worth living and I matter just because I have love for myself, love for others and that others love me also. Then everything becomes less heavy. I have no proof to make. I'm not irreplaceable and the world would keep on working without me so now I am free to choose where and how I want to make a difference instead of being a victim of my life.</p> <p>I'm not able to reach that level of freedom every day and I still am sometimes submerged with the energy of living like I'll never die and I feel like I have to hold everything in place. I call them my Atlas moments. But I keep on practicing death and it is very liberating.</p>
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Leslie

My first experience facing death was when I was a child. I was laying in bed having a conversation with what I believed was God. I was six or seven years old. God told me that my Dad was going to die earlier than I would expect and that his death would bulldoze my Mom. I was deeply sad and terrified. I didn't understand. My dad was my hero. To me he was invisible. I was so sad that I had to get my parents out of bed and tell my mom that he would die and she would be bulldozed. My parents thought I had a bad dream but to me this was not a dream. It was real and I was awake not sleeping like a dream. I continued having conversations with God about his death for some time as well as conversations about life. I remember feeling as though my own life was so much bigger than just this little girl Leslie. I told God that I was bigger than the space I am in. I repeated that to God over and over. Somehow there was an urgency in communicating the sense that I truly was bigger than the space I had been put in and I wasn't sure how to reconcile that in my life. I didn't fit into the space.

Around fifteen years later my father was diagnosed with Pick's Disease, a form of dementia that impacts the frontal and temporal lobes of the brain. He was 52 years old and sick for approximately eight years before he died. And my mom was bulldozed in a way. At the same time my brother had stage four cancer and he came to live with me. Suddenly death was all around me. Death was in my face everyday. Death became a daily thought. At the time I happened to be studying and practicing Tibetan Buddhism. I felt very supported by the dharma and yet very isolated in many ways. I quickly discovered the taboo around talking about sickness and death. People had difficulties asking about my brother and my father. I noticed how many people also avoided me altogether when my brother was living with me. But I found that my experience was allowing me how to release control and surrender into the mystery in a way I hadn't before. What and who I thought I was changed and I was able to see myself from a cosmic perspective. My life was enhanced and I felt more alive. And how I wanted to live changed and everything became sweeter.

Fast forward to today and my brother is still alive beating stage four cancer two times. My experience with my pod gave me another taste of the sweetness of life through our exploration into death over these past months. There is a sense of freedom that comes through the practice of imaging that everyday could be your last day. Through this practice I was able to cultivate a deeper embodied awareness of the fact that without death there is no life. In our group we also touched on the fact that death is a gift that creates the opportunity to live fully. My sense of time shifted through this exercise as well and I was able to see the cyclical nature of life and death in a new way.

Lilian	<p>Thinking about death had always arose a lingering feeling of melancholy that sometimes I found hard to stand. I feel that there is a strong attachment to my individual existence and the sadness that all the things that I have experienced and done would vanish one day.</p> <p>I followed the exercise designed by Rob – for 48 hours, treat each day as my last, participate each interaction as if it were my last. My curiosity was how would I feel and act to confront the fact that I might die any moment, and also what might open up for me. It was an intense experience doing the practice and feeling the impact, first on my nervous system, then on my thinking and action. I remember walking home and thinking if this was my last stroll... and I felt a heightened sense of awareness of my surrounding and my body sensation – my pace slow down and I even took a different route which I like a lot more.</p> <p>I also noticed that my sense of time was “linear”; and while doing the practice, I sensed that something (of me/ outside of me) is passing away and coming in every moment... there is a deepening awareness and awakening to the present moment.</p>
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Our path of sharing about death

In our calls, we shared our inquiries, views, and feelings about death. The conversation touched each of us in different ways, and as we reflected back on why and how it went so well, we were able to trace the path we took through the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd perspectives and noticed that sharing from the different perspectives helped move and deepen our sharing. Below we have recorded some of our inquiries and sharing:

Third person perspectives - It / Its

- What is death and what happens before and after?
- Bardo, the moment of transition
- Talking with someone working in hospice and how people will wait to die until their loved ones show up to see them
- Do people know when they will die? Animals such as dogs, conscious prepare for their death by , what about human being?
- What does it mean to die? What if there is no life after death, we just vanish...
- Do we get reincarnated?

- Leslie shared a book, 30 Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation

2nd Person perspectives - We

- *Red blossoms, though fallen, have some feeling still,
Turned into mud in spring they want to protect the tree.*
落紅不是無情物 化作春泥更護花 - A Chinese Poem by Gong Zi-

Zhen

- We spoke about the death of “I” contributing to the “We” keeping the life force going as there will be nothing left of our current body/ identity. In fact, from a Confucian point of view, *a meaningful life is one that develops one's innate moral potential to the fullest while fulfilling all of one's social obligations.*
- We shared our questions
 - What would you regret if you knew this was the last week of your life...
 - How can we be conscious and clear of our unfinished business?
 - What am I contributing to the “we” space in this moment?
- We discussed our takeaways on an article about a woman writing a speed dating profile for her husband as she was diagnosed with terminal cancer and was going to die.
- Often times we think about ourselves when we talked about death, “have I accomplished...”
- How’s my life connected with other people? How could we allow others to accomplish what they want to ...

1st person perspectives - I

- At the end of our time together we reflected on where we had been and the impact our pod dialogue together over the past months.
- We were all touched by the sharing and felt connected, warm and respectful.
- There was a deep respect for each other and life force in our dialogue as it brought us to appreciate more of the “We” space of the topic, and in sharing our experience of death, we appreciate and celebrate more of life.

Dying to be me

On our journey of exploration, we came across the story of Anita Moorjani, who had an exceptional Near Death Experience. In 2006, after suffering cancer for almost four years, Anita's organs started shutting down and she slipped into a deep coma. She was rushed to the hospital where she claims to have crossed into the afterlife during what is often referred to as a [Near Death Experience \(NDE\)](#). Upon returning from her NDE, her body healed from the [end-stage lymphoma](#) within a matter of days and within months was completely cancer free.

TedEx by Anita Moorjani – Dying to be me <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhcJNJbRJ6U>

Recap on the 5 important lessons shared by Anita on that video

- 1 - Focus our awareness on love (start by loving yourself)
- 2 - Live life fearlessly (best way to be safe is love, not fear)
- 3 - Humor, laughter and joy
- 4 - Life is a gift (each challenge in your life is a gift, if you don't see it yet, it is because you're not at the end of the challenge)
- 5 - Always be yourself (shine your light)

The story told by Anita also led us to explore the 0 person perspective (along with first, second and third person perspective) from Ken Wilber. The no person perspective, or non dual awareness, which is what Anita experienced when she died and describes that she could see everything including her brother across the world running to get on a flight to come see her after learning about her imminent death. Meditation is another way to be non dual awareness.

As human beings grow and develop, there is a piece of us/a version of us from the previous level that must die, and that we must accept or learn to let go. Otherwise, this part will transform or hide into shadows and block us at some point.

We also took a step back and took systems view.

When I die, then my family has to accept that a part of it died and it will make it evolves or been born into something new. If it can not accept my death, then I will become a shadow in that family.

And then when to a more micro systems view. When some of my skin dies, if I don't let it go, I will block the new skin from growing.

The Joy and freedom of being dead

Leslie sharing about her friend, when she knew that she only had a few months to live, she felt relieved. She felt a sense of relief when she knew when she was going to die soon and suddenly in that moment she realized the purpose of her life with such clarity and life

force. She went on to go into remission from her stage four cancer miraculously and still feels the dynamic life force everyday and is able to manifest that in her life in many ways. Others around her can feel that something is different about her. People are very curious about her fullness and share that they feel more alive when they are around her.

Our learning from the POD journey

Our experience with death and our learning and how this relates to our development as Integral Facilitator:

Aithan	<p>A learning that stands out over the months I have been tuned toward the practice of death is through reading an article about a woman in her early fifties who was diagnosed with cancer -and has since died- that wrote a profile for her husband on a dating website. In the form of a letter, she wrote about how remarkable her husband is as a partner over 20 years, as a father, as a chef, and how he is truly a ‘catch’. Our Pod was as moved as I was sharing the article and my response. The ‘we’ perspective of death was elevated and placed differently for me after experiencing her letter. I realized that when speaking with others about death over the years, the subject tends to turn inward, toward a contemplative place reflecting on individual mortality. The woman’s letter for her husband awakened a presence of connecting to what happens to others and the world through our death. What further struck me further, and as profoundly, was her way of seeing that living life, regardless of what happens at and after death, is about our connection with others.</p> <p>The practice of death for me over these months has been a remarkable deepening in learning about the practice of life. I have already experienced a strengthening in conviction and connection in my facilitation work as I begin to integrate the practice of death into life. Furthermore, the richness in depth and perspectives on the subject and practice of death in our Pod has been invaluable. In addition to sharing our perspectives and experiences, the group’s availability for depth, safety, and willingness to inquire enabled valuable experimentation and a flow into new sense making and possibilities.</p>
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Christian	<p>It is the humbling portion of my exploration that I will bring back into my facilitation practice. That nice place of letting go of my ego and of the importance I put on myself and the perception that I'm the one holding everything in place. When I can let go of my Atlas identity, I find that I can be more present to what is there, what wants to emerge and choose what is important for me in being here. What do I want to let myself be the instrument for and what I don't want to be used for.</p> <p>It switches my perspective on what is important from « the output/doing » to the « outcome/being ».</p>
Leslie	<p>In practicing death these past few months with my pod I have felt more freedom. And I wouldn't necessarily say I have been happier but I have felt everything more deeply. Practicing death has allowed me to relax into myself more fully even in times of sorrow and anxiety in these past months. My ability to make a choice feels like a luxury. I have been able to dis-identify with my small self and deconstruct some very old patterns in my ego. My sense of timelessness has deepened and I can see the ways in which my separate self moves to reestablish its identification. I notice that I am freer in how I relate as well. There is no separation between reality and my responses. I can taste the full circle and connection between life and death and how we both arise into life and dissolve into death through the causal, subtle and gross realms and into the nothingness that is full of everything.</p> <p>I felt deeply connected to my pod throughout our time together. There was a 'we' space that was created and I felt through our discussions and practicing death. We met every week between the intensives and it became something that I looked forward to and truly enriched my life. I felt a sense of consistency and ease with them and our work together always brought me a sense of flow. I feel our topic contributed to this but there was something deeper at work in this pod. As I reflect I recognize that we all held the vision we set out in the beginning of our time together. And now looking back to our vision I can clearly see how we fulfilled that vision so fully without ever going back to read it again. As an Integral Facilitator it is clear how I can now more confidently and clearly navigate the depths of dissolution and letting go.</p>

Lilian	<p>Our Pod’s exploration on death has allowed me to look direct into a topic that I am both intrigued and scared of. In the past, learning around death had been mostly intellectual for me, with limited opportunity to dialogue and share own feelings. Our Pod’s conversations had inspired/ supported me to further investigate, reflect, and even discuss death with my family.</p> <p>Several stories, article, movies have caught my attention or resurfaced since we started practicing death. One of them is a sharing by Ajahn Brahm, Grief, Loss and Celebrating a Life, which he spoke about how he felt as a music lover in 60s and 70s, leaving a concert hall/ pub/ club after a great musical performance... <i>“As I walked out into the cold, damp of the London night, the stirring music still echoed in my mind, “What magnificent music! What a powerful performance! How lucky I was to have been there at the time!” I never felt grief at the end of a great concert... And that is exactly how I felt after my own father’s death. It was as if a great concert had finally come to an end. It was such a wonderful performance.”</i></p> <p>His words, <i>“Grief is seeing only what has been taken away from you. The celebration of a life is recognizing all that we were blessed with, and feeling so very grateful”</i> brought me to an even deeper gratitude of life.</p> <p>My continual practice is in the appreciation and experiencing of the nature of living and dying as one thing, cultivating a fearless quality in my facilitation for living my vow.</p>
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Reference

The Aleph (Short Story) by Jorge Luis Borges

You may want to marry my husband by Amy Krouse Rosenthal

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/03/style/modern-love-you-may-want-to-marry-my-husband.html?_r=0

Dying to be me - TedEx by Anita Moorjani <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhcJNJbRJ6U>

Grief, Loss, and Celebrating a Life by Ajahn Brahm, from Who Ordered This Truck Load of Dung

<http://www.stillwatermpc.org/dharma-topics/loss-grief-and-celebration/>

A Piano Played by Five Pianists at Once (First Attempt) <https://vimeo.com/kktnk/piano?>

[ref=em-v-share](#)