

In the traditional telling of the story of the Buddha, while still pregnant, his mother was told by a sage she would give birth to an extraordinary child. The sage said her child would either become a king or a great spiritual leader. Siddhartha was born into a life of privilege and luxury. His father wanted his son to become a powerful king, which is why they insulated him from all forms of suffering. He feared that suffering would turn him towards a path of spirituality. Although Siddhartha had all his desires catered to, being a rebellious and curious young person, he ventured out of the palace when he was twenty-nine years old. Here, it is said he witnessed a very old person, a sick person, and a corpse.

These three, known as the heavenly messengers, paired with the knowledge that all these phenomena occur to all living beings, was what led him to his spiritual path. After living for a few years as an ascetic and not being satisfied with the results, he developed his own spiritual path, which eventually resulted in him obtaining enlightenment and earning the title of Buddha, meaning awakened one.

But the three heavenly messengers extend beyond the origin story of how Siddhartha became the Buddha. They are a foundation for his teachings. They are a basis of a very important teaching in Buddhism called the Five Remembrances. The Five Remembrances are a form of radical equanimity. They embrace aging, illness, death, impermanence, and karma.

Before going any further, I'd like to list the five.

Number one, "I'm of the nature to grow old. I have not gone beyond aging."

Number two, "I'm of the nature to have ill health. I have not gone beyond illness."

Number three, "I am of the nature to die. I have not gone beyond death."

Number four, "I will be separated and parted from all that is dear and beloved to me."

Number five, "I am the owner of my own actions. Whatever I do for good or for evil, to that I will fall heir"

Before I go too deep into this practice, I want to acknowledge that it's very challenging. The entire point of the five remembrances is to overcome discomfort with these very real parts of life. So if you're uncomfortable at first, you're far from alone.

In the sake of transparency, I'm only beginning to introduce these into my practice. This isn't a practice of numbing yourself to these parts of life. Feeling our grief is very important. We want to find a middle path between numbing ourselves with denial and numbing ourselves with stoicism. In between the two, there is plenty of room for grief and fear.

My favorite definition of equanimity is being unafraid to feel fear. One of the things that makes the Five Remembrances difficult is that the first four are very stigmatized in our society. Because we have so much fear around these things, it's profoundly counter-cultural to make a daily practice of reminding ourselves about them.

We think of older and sick folks as less valuable. As we become less able to be productive or need support from others, our capitalist society sees our worth decline. One reason I speak so passionately about disability pride is that I find this view to be so toxic. Value is not connected to productivity or how much support we need.

Furthermore, we are all of the nature to grow old, get sick, and die. We shouldn't feel shame over this inevitability. It's not a personal failure. This is why the Buddha also extended the practice beyond the individual and suggested that we practice common humanity, saying not just, "I am of the nature," but also, "We are of the nature."

This both takes away the feeling of it being personal and allows us to have compassion for others. Resistance to these facts of life are a big source of suffering. By resisting reality, we are participating in clinging to the way things are, aversion to impermanence, and delusion of the unavoidable. The Buddha specifically named all three of these things as being fuel for Dukkha.

Aging, illness, death, and impermanence are scary facts of life, so we're not going to totally free ourselves from the grief that they can cause us. But by reflecting on them regularly, we can soften the depth of their impact. The Buddha described humans as having an intoxication with youth, health, and life itself. Our intoxication with these not only causes us to fear their opposites, but also sometimes we live without reverence for these things. We may not protect our fragility and prematurely bring on illness or death.

Typically, in Buddhism, we talk about uncertainty. For the most part, all of life is uncertain, so this makes a lot of sense. A big part of equanimity is becoming comfortable with the groundlessness of life. A major exception for uncertainty is the first four of the remembrances. No matter what your spiritual or political

views are, we can all agree aging, illness, death, and impermanence are inescapable truths. Aversion to these realities is one reason that we suffer.

They can be something that looms over us when we fear them. What the Five Remembrances is trying to teach us is to not take these things personally when they come. Another benefit of practicing the Five Remembrances is that they put us in touch with the preciousness of life and the beauty that can be found in impermanence.

There's something sweeter about the present moment when we all know that it's fleeting. We have to enjoy our lives while we can because they won't always be here. This can either be viewed as tragic or precious, depending on how we choose to be with it.

In many ways, it feels quite ableist to say that we have to get as much out of life as we can. As someone who can't even leave my home easily, I can't just explore the world and squeeze every drop out of every day. I like to reframe this concept in ways that are more accessible. Rather than getting the most out of your life, it's how you occupy your mind. What do you fill your cup with? In the words of Gil Fronsdale, "For someone who's a practitioner, knowing that you're going to die, what gets born in you, do you have something better to do than to be afraid of what's coming?"

One thing that's important to me is expressing my love for the people and all the good things I have in my life. The Five Remembrances teach us to have gratitude for the way that things are right now.

In Buddhist philosophy, death is not seen as a bad thing or something to avoid. They are a reminder of the preciousness of life. This can strengthen our mindfulness practice and give us a forward edge. Here's a quote from death doula Alua Arthur, "But let's not talk about our bodies as prisons. In these bodies, we have the privilege of experiencing the magical playground of Earth. Because of our bodies, we get to eat donuts, jump in puddles, smell rare spices, listen to children's laughter, blow bubbles with gum, make art, make flan, and make love. Because we get to live, we get to die. Death does not happen to us. It's something that we do. To die is an action verb." End quote.

I'd like to dig a little deeper into each of the five remembrances and explain my understanding of them and their importance.

Number one, I am of the nature to grow old. I have not gone beyond aging. Every day we are older than we've ever been. That can be a little scary to think about. Each year when my birthday rolled around, I used to joke, as many do,

that I was turning an age far younger than I really was. At some point, however, I realized I no longer wished I was twenty-two. I had experienced a lot of growth in the years since then, and by joking I was younger than I was, I was denying myself that growth.

Aging is a both/and experience. As time passes, I continue to develop more wrinkles and more gray hairs. My hairline recedes even further back, and my hearing will become less acute. Society has a very negative view on aging, which is sad because we all do it. Not a person who's lived has figured out how to stop it. And yet the teaching of Anatta says that we have no fixed self. Of course, we change and evolve, and that comes with all the struggles of aging.

Here's a quote from buddhistlearning.org. "Aging is not a single event, but a relentless moment-by-moment process of cellular decay, metabolic slowdown, and general fading of beauty and vitality. In Buddhist psychology, the suffering associated with aging does not stem from physical changes themselves, but from our deep attachment to a fixed, unchanging identity. The 'I' imagines that we will forever look thirty-five." End quote.

As my fortieth birthday approaches, once again, I feel some resistance to my age. At the same time, I'm still me. I'm an ever-changing human, as we all are, but that doesn't take away my identity.

Number two, I am of the nature to have ill health. I have not gone beyond illness. This one is very personal to me, and I'm sure many people in this group relate. Although I have been disabled my whole life, ten years ago, I developed a chronic illness that has forever changed my life. I think it's important to acknowledge the both/and of this. There has been both loss and gain from my chronic illness.

Being able to accept illness allows us to see the two sides it brings. It's not all negative. Although I do not want to glorify a silver lining perspective, seeing that there is intricacy in life helps us with aversion. Illness causes a lot of instability in our lives. Things can change significantly, seemingly overnight.

Once again, I think anatta is very relevant. Just because I have changed doesn't mean I am no longer myself. There is no fixed version of me. I would be changing every moment regardless of illness. That doesn't mean that illness doesn't contain grief, just that grieving isn't synonymous with a negative experience.

Serious illness can open our heart to others. Compassion is an important teaching. Although illness is a harsh vehicle for that lesson, it doesn't make it

less valuable. I also believe that awareness that we are all of the nature to get sick could have an impact on things like public policy. When we realize that all humans are vulnerable to serious illness and disability, socialized medicine, income, and housing are a lot more appealing.

This remembrance also teaches us that karma is not the cause of illness. We are all of the nature to become ill, regardless of karma. Attaching illness to karma invites the second arrow on something that is inevitable.

Number three, I am of the nature to die. I have not gone beyond death. Death is likely one of the most taboo parts of our existence. And of course, death is full of grief, but we all do it. Dying is quite natural. The third remembrance is considered to be the most powerful of the five. This is perhaps because if we somehow escape aging and illness, it's due to an early death. Reflections on death is not meant to be morbid or sad. In fact, its purpose is to reduce fear about our death.

It's thought that when we are cognizant of our own death, trivial concerns that we can all get lost in will be recognized as trivial, and we can focus on the things that really matter, such as love, integrity, and presence. The Buddha said that we should all contemplate death, not just every day, but with every breath. That may be a little extreme for you, and definitely for my own practice, but it's important to begin to ponder death on a regular basis.

Number four, I will be separated and parted from all that is dear and beloved to me. It is sometimes said that everything we possess is on loan from the universe. Because we are all of the nature to die, we will all also experience the death of those who we love. The things we treasure will break or get lost. Nothing lasts. Again, if we become accustomed to this idea, it will feel less foreign and personal when it happens. Thich Nhat Hanh said, "It's not impermanence that makes us suffer. What makes us suffer is wanting things to be permanent when they are not."

Number five, I am the owner of my actions. Whatever I do for good or for evil, to that I will fall heir. The first four of the remembrances are about aspects of life that we cannot control. The fifth touches on what we do have control over, our actions. This reminds us that we do have some agency in our lives.

The word consequence is often thought of as punishment, but the definition in the Merriam-Webster is something produced by a cause or necessarily following from a set of conditions. This means that consequences for our actions doesn't necessarily mean punishment for something bad. When we are kind to others, the consequence is often receiving kindness in return. Cruelty towards others

means cruelty will be reflected back at us. This isn't divine intervention or Santa Claus' list of our bad and good deeds. Think of it more as Newton's third law of motion. For every action, there is a reaction. This means that we have choices in how we live our limited time on this plane of existence.

I also think of karma as being impermanent, meaning something difficult that happens to you today is not necessarily about unwholesome actions you took twenty years ago. We have the ability to change who we are. That's just another part of what anatta is about. We may have been mean to a person in the past, and that doesn't necessarily define who we are in the future.