

# Cemetery Contemplations

Venerable Bhikkhu Sona

Cemetery Contemplations, *Venerable Bhikkhu Sona*  
Written at the Pemberton Forest Monastery, 1996.

Photos on pages 22 & 23 by Brian Calkins  
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The following photo series was taken at Wat Keun in North East Thailand over a three-week period in April 1992. It is intended as an aid to the meditation subject “nine charnel ground contemplations” as found in the “Foundations of Mindfulness” teachings of the Buddha (see Endnote, page 8, excerpt from the *Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*).

The ‘meditations on a corpse’ is one of several subjects found in the category of ‘right mindfulness’ in the Noble Eightfold Path. The body is the first of four subjects for the practice of mindfulness, the others being feelings, mental states and Dhamma. The Buddha recommends this object in order that the tendency to cherish and identify with the body or to deny the reality of death and the fragility of the body, can be counteracted.

The Buddha says: “Again, bhikkhus, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, one, two, or three days dead, bloated, livid, and oozing matter, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it thus: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’”

I would like to point out an observation: “The phrase ‘as though’ (*seyyathapi*) suggests that this meditation... need not be based upon an actual encounter with a corpse in the state of decay described, but can be performed as an imaginative exercise. ‘This same body’ is, of course, the meditator’s own body.” [Bhikkhu Bodhi]

Most humans find death a fearful mystery, and the dead body repulsive, puzzling and frightening. However, the human tendency is to deny, at some level, that death and decay will occur, both to themselves and to those dear to them.

“Anyone’s death always releases something like an aura of stupefaction, so difficult is it to grasp this irruption of nothingness and to believe that it has actually taken place” [G. Flaubert].

Flaubert has captured the feeling of loss of another. But what of our own death? Let us hear from Tolstói on this matter:

“Ivan Ilych saw that he was dying, and he was in continuous despair. In the depth of his heart he knew he was dying, but

not only was he not accustomed to the thought, he simply did not and could not grasp it.

“The syllogism he had learned from Kiezawetter’s Logic: ‘Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal’ had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius, but certainly not as applied to himself. That Caius – man in the abstract – was mortal, was perfectly correct, but he was not Caius, not an abstract man, but a creature quite, quite separate from all others.” [from *the Death of Ivan Ilych*]

Consider once again the Buddha’s exhortation: “... This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.”

The body shown in the photos is that of a 42-year old Thai man. He lived about five kilometers from the monastery in a small village of about 100 people. He was the head-man of the village and was married with three children. He was in good health and was well liked by the people of his village. He was, by all accounts, a good man.

At about 7pm one evening in early April, just as the light was fading, as he was standing in his yard, a man pulled up on a motorcycle and without warning, shot the victim in the chest from close range, with a sawed-off shotgun. The unknown assailant then escaped. Family and neighbours came running at the startlingly loud blast and found the victim already dead.

The next morning, anxious to remove the body from the village, as death by violence is considered very inauspicious because of possible trouble from the victim’s ghost, the villagers brought the corpse to Wat Keun.

At the monastery the monks perceived the event in a somewhat different light than did the villagers. For the monks, this sudden death and the appearance of the body was an opportunity for spiritual practice. The situation was a startling reminder not only of death, but of the unpredictable nature of life. It was so abrupt. Could it not have been any one of us? He did not die of old age, nor was he ill, nor in an obviously dangerous situation, but in the full bloom of life he had suddenly disappeared.

The villagers obligingly laid the corpse in a shallow grave in a homemade coffin with an easily removable lid. The spot chosen was about half a kilometer into the large forest surrounding the monastery – quiet, remote and secluded – an ideal location in which to practise corpse meditation. A meditation walking path was hacked out of the forest next to the grave, and a bare, level spot for sitting meditation was constructed immediately beside the corpse.

The monks were to take turns in lonely vigils over the corpse. We could visit throughout the day and each of us had an opportunity to spend one or more nights alone with the body as it progressed through the stages of decomposition.

On the afternoon of the first day, the monks realized they had to remove the clothing from the corpse in order to witness the process of decomposition. Since April is the height of the hot season, with temperatures of over 100 deg F, the body had already begun to bloat. The clothing was skin-tight and a terrible stench had begun to permeate the air 15 meters in every direction. With a razor knife we managed to peel away the clothing while trying not to slice open the skin, at the same time fighting the urge to gag as a result of the penetrating odour (you may note that we did not succeed in entirely removing his shirt).

The first photo was taken within 24 hours of death. One can see red blood still oozing from the chest wound and blood on the face as well. The facial blood was probably caused by falling since the seven pellet wounds all centered around the heart. The mouth has already opened in the characteristic ‘death grin’. The hair is still in reasonably good condition while the body is beginning to deform. The healthy, shiny and clean look of the hair made a dissonant impression on me because the hair is something we judge to be a mark of style and beauty – but is here, so strangely, on this stinking corpse.

Flies had begun to collect, primarily on the face, probably because of the fluids on the skin’s surface. The eyes, nose, mouth and ears ooze and attract the flies.

Another feature one may notice is that the blackening process begins with the face and upper chest and it is quite some time until the body from the chest down turns blue.

In photos 2 and 3 one can see that the legs as well as bloating and bending have also formed pockets of fluid. This fluid also increases the reek – which is just short of overwhelming. In fact once one is familiar with the characteristic odour one can catch it, on a still day, 50 meters from the gravesite.

By photo 4 the swelling has reached its peak and as one sits near the corpse in the quiet of the night, gases under pressure occasionally hiss out of the pellet wounds. The sound is disturbingly close to a rasping exhalation of breath, and again, the already ghastly stink is given a temporary boost. The corpse has now begun to lose fluid through evaporation. The bubbles of fluid on the legs have disappeared leaving reddish, wrinkled skin flaps. The upper body and face are now completely covered by flies, – a moving ocean of insects.

Photo 5. The mouth is completely covered by maggots and one can only guess that it is still open. In the photos one does not get the disturbing effect of the intense motion of these insects. They are in continuous activity in their feeding. It was difficult to take my eyes off the fountain-like effect they produce in and around the mouth. As well, these photos were taken in bright daylight. The effect of candle illumination in the still midnight was nearly hallucinogenic. These maggots fed 24 hours a day.

Photos 7 to 12 show the body becoming blue/black, and the maggots have spread across its surface. The mouth outline is becoming apparent and it seems that the body must be full of them, having entered through the mouth and made their way to the stomach.

Photo 10. The insect activity is subsiding and so is the stench. This is the effect of the low humidity and high heat of April in Thailand.

Photo 11. The fact that the skin has become dried and leathery, and has collapsed in the left leg, shows the surprising fact that the body is practically hollow. The skin is now merely a leathery covering for the bones.

The photos show the face and teeth emerging from beneath the fountain of maggots. The incredible expression of the gaping mouth and white teeth were difficult to ignore by flickering candlelight.

The remaining photos show the emerging holes in the skin. That the skin is a mere shell over the hollow body is obvious.

In the last two photos, a flap of skin and hair has fallen away to expose the skull bone. The body is seen to be merging with the earth, which an unexpected rain had washed into the shallow grave.

The coffin was closed at this stage at the request of the relatives. Because of the drying effect, it would probably have been quite some time before any further significant decomposition would take place. In the description of the charnel ground contemplations as found in the discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness there are phases where the bones are scattered by jackals and dogs, etc. Here we were careful to close the coffin when we were not there, to avoid just this happening. Local dogs and other animals were attracted by the odour and were eager to follow the letter of the teaching.

We've added two final photos to suggest the presence of animals and the scattering of bleached bones. These were taken by Brian Calkins in 2004 at Birken Monastery. They are not from the original corpse.

## ENDNOTE

*The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*

Translation: Bhikkhu Ñanamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi

Wisdom Publications. 148–149

*(The Nine Charnel Ground Contemplations)*

14. “Again, bhikkhus, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, one, two, or three days dead, bloated, livid, and oozing matter, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it thus: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’

15. “In this way he abides contemplating the body as a body internally, externally, and both internally and externally... And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That too is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body.

16. “Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, being devoured by crows, hawks, vultures, dogs, jackals, or various kinds of worms, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it thus: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’

17. “...That too is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body.

18–24. “Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, a skeleton with flesh and blood, held together with sinews... a fleshless skeleton smeared with blood, held together with sinews... a skeleton without flesh and blood,



held together with sinews... disconnected bones scattered in all directions – here a hand-bone, there a foot-bone, here a shin-bone, there a thigh-bone, here a hip-bone, there a back-bone, here a rib-bone, there a breast-bone, here an arm-bone, there a shoulder-bone, here a neck-bone, there a jaw-bone, here a tooth, there the skull – a bhikkhu compares this same body with it thus: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’

25. “...That too is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body.

26–30. “Again, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, bones bleached white, the colour of shells... bones heaped up, more than a year old... bones rotted and crumbled to dust, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it thus: ‘This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.’

(INSIGHT)

31. “In this way he abides contemplating the body as a body internally, or he abides contemplating the body as a body externally, or he abides contemplating the body as a body both internally and externally. Or else he abides contemplating in the body its arising factors, or he abides contemplating in the body its vanishing factors, or he abides contemplating in the body both its arising and vanishing factors. Or else mindfulness that ‘there is a body’ is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness. And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That too is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body.”



PHOTO 1



PHOTO 2



PHOTO 3



PHOTO 4



PHOTO 5



PHOTO 6



PHOTO 7





PHOTO 8



PHOTO 9



PHOTO 10



PHOTO 11



PHOTO 12



**VEN. BHIKKHU SONA**

Born in Canada, Ven. Sona's background as a layperson is in classical guitar performance. His encounter with Buddhist wisdom as a young man initiated a spiritual journey that led him to become a lay hermit for several years. He subsequently ordained as a Theravada monk under Ven. Gunaratana, at the Bhavana Society in West Virginia, where his first years of training took place. Ven. Sona further trained for over



three years at monasteries following Ajahn Chah in northeast Thailand, especially Wat Pah Nanachat. Upon his return to Canada in 1994 he helped found a Forest Monastery near Pemberton, BC. As its spiritual guide, Ajahn (“teacher”) Sona has led the monastery through each stage of its growth. He established Birken (or, Sitavana, ‘cool forest’) in its final location south of Kamloops BC in 2001.

