

Day of the Dead meditation: a celebration of life

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Hi, this is Rohan. Today's episode we have an extra-special meditation practice dedicated to Day of the Dead, which will be celebrated in Mexico next week.

Just over a year ago I met Pedro, a journalist and news anchor from Mexico City. My wife and I hosted him at our home in Glasgow for a fun few days, and at the end of the trip, he said, the very best time to visit him is for Día de Muertos, for Day of the Dead: "It's the time of the year when we are most ourselves." I must confess that at the time my only real understanding of Day of the Dead was through watching the wonderful Pixar film *Coco* with my children, so Pedro's comment surprised me and got me intrigued as to what it was about the holiday that was so integral to his sense of Mexicanness. And it made me want to understand it more. Day of the Dead, Día de Muertos, takes place on the 1st and 2nd of November. We wanted to mark this special time of year and dedicate our meditation episode to it.

Not all cultures are as open about death and the dead as the people of Mexico. It is a difficult and painful topic for many of us, not necessarily something we want to linger on. I get that. But if you know anything about Day of the Dead, you'll know that at its heart, it's a festival a festival about community, about the celebration of life and remembering. Families gather over dinner to honor the lives of their dead as an intimate ritual to celebrate those lives. In these dinners the air is filled with laughter, stories, and nostalgia. So that is what our meditation together will be about too. And yes, skeletons. There may be some skeletons.

Reflecting on death and grief has long been part of the mindfulness tradition. We'll explore some of that later in the episode too.

You know it's the time of the year to celebrate and honor death when the city starts to paint itself in golden, warm orange. Waves and waves of marigolds are brought into the markets and make their way to storefronts, they dress the streets and fill homes. How about we let the image of a wave of marigolds fill our minds.

As we start our practice today, if it's safe and you're able to close your eyes then please do.

Even though our eyes are closed, there is still a visual field. The inside of our eyelids, mixed with the light from the space we're in. Any mental imagery you might have.

Let it be golden orange. Filled with marigolds.

You might see it as orange. You might only imagine it as orange. You might only think about a visual field full of orange, a field full of marigolds. You do you.

The Aztec word for marigold is *sempa-sooch-il*. The origin of which means the flower of twenty flowers. Petals upon petals. Glorious head-like blooms sitting atop their green spines.

Let's keep dropping into the field of orange if we can, its warmth softening our faces, our heads sitting atop our spines but with softness. Petals and petals of relaxation across the body, the orange warmth able to release any holding that might be here.

Marigolds. Marigolds heralding the celebration of life.

In many ways the offer-ren-da is the heart of it all. An ofrenda is a temporary altar in the home, with photographs of family members who are no longer with us. A visual lineage with people going back through time. Inviting them to return for the holiday, we put out their favourite food, candles to light their way. Candy skulls, bread, icons and other decorations. Marigolds, of course marigolds.

We will build our ofrenda too. Going back in time with the magic of memory, bring to mind the image of a person furthest back from your history that you can visualise, you may have known them or just seen a photo of them. You may not know their favourite food but you can place some bread, some **pan de muerto** for them.

Let's take some time here. Bring to mind loved ones and family members who are dead, and place them on the ofrenda of your remembrance.

And if you do know their favourite food then place that here too. Even better.

I place the grandparents I knew briefly when I visited Sri Lanka as a child. I place my father's father, even though he died long before I was born. I don't really know what he looked like but I have a sense of who he was. He was quite the character by all accounts.

Here's my great uncle and my great aunt. With the fish curry they loved so much.

Take your time.

Build your ofrenda.

If you feel happy, feel happy.

If you feel sad, feel sad

If you feel joyful, feel joy.

A big part of the Day of the Dead is to allow ourselves space for our grief and memories, and let them come as they are. We give them the space, free from judgment, to be present. This is freedom.

Some people choose not to put an altar in their homes but, on this holiday, everyone keeps a space, a space within them.

However makes sense for you, take another look at your ofrenda

What food will you have?

Acknowledging that everyone there, their lives has a ripple effect on our own. We're all part of a larger cycle and one day we'll be on the ofrenda of others. The offer-ren-dass of others. Ourselves welcomed back.

Let's also remember that holding all this with a sense of humor is a crucial part of the Mexican personality. The capacity to laugh about anything at any time. Humour is the greatest ally, and we invite it to lighten the weight of every day and even the heaviest moments.

Can we acknowledge *that* with a smile?

Maybe that smile moves to a fun memory of someone we've lost.

For me it's Laurie, a friend of mine who died just last year. He was a big cyclist, and many of his friends rode a guard of honour for the hearse at his funeral on their bikes, a sea of color on the street. In his last few days, he had asked those riding to wear their most outrageous cycling gear. The joker that he was, even then. Laurie's on my ofrenda.

Who will be on yours?

Who moved you to laughter in their life?

Let's close with La Catrina

She is perhaps the most iconic symbol of Día de Muertos, the tall elegant skeleton with her flamboyant hat bedecked with large feathers. And nowadays, glowed up with her sugar skull makeup. A characterization of death, she is unruly, indomitable, mischievous and here. She is the star, centre stage in the parades. A symbol not only of death but just as importantly, of the lightness, the sense of humour that allows Mexicans to integrate, and transcend the pain of death through celebration.

La Catrina reminds us that we too have a skeleton. That she will one day come for us. And that's ok. La Catrina and her inevitability is both an invitation to be ok with that and an inspiration to use our time well.

Having the Day of the Dead as an annual event means that at least once a year, people in Mexico have to face death. But the reality is that people in other places tend not to reflect on their mortality that often.

When my father died, now almost ten years ago, we had the opportunity to have his body laid out in the house before his cremation. My eldest [sister] strongly argued that we should, while the rest of us were really not that sure about it, but she won out and I'm so grateful that she did. I can't describe what being in the presence of his body did for me, but it did do something.

Actually I think it's still doing some magic. The normalization of this thing which is as normal as anything.

We'll close with some words from the great Mexican poet, Octavio Paz

"The cult of life, if it really is deep and total, is also a cult of death. Both are inseparable. A civilization that denies death ends up denying life."

Thank you and go well. Adios!

Special thanks to Carolina Lomelí in Mexico City for providing research for this episode.

If you'd like to get in touch with your Day of the Dead reflections and tributes, we'd love to hear from you. Email us at [hello @ meditative Story](mailto:hello@meditativestory.com), or can find us on all your social media platforms through our handle **at meditativestory**.