

# The Buddhist practice of mindfulness of death (marāṇasati) from the perspective of Aristotelian virtue ethics

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**Abstract.** As an important method of spiritual practice, Buddhist mindfulness of death (marāṇasati) is significant not merely as a reflection upon the concept of death, but in that it influences the agent's practice through the awareness of death and promotes the cultivation of character. Adopting the perspective of practical philosophy and focusing on the question of how death enters the agent's practice and influences the formation of virtue, this paper examines the different paths taken by Aristotle's theory of tragedy and the Buddhist method of mindfulness of death. Through an analysis of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the *Poetics*, and the Buddhist tradition of mindfulness-of-death practice, it is concluded that death itself does not directly generate virtue; its practical significance lies not in the fact of being the end of life, but in that it reveals the finitude of the agent's existence. Aristotelian tragedy provokes practical reflection by having one witness the fate of others, whereas Buddhist mindfulness of death advances the reorientation of practice through contemplation of one's own impermanence; though their paths differ, both jointly reveal the possible mechanism by which the awareness of death enters the agent's practice. This paper summarizes this mechanism as "finite practice", and on this basis explains how death can be transformed from a mere fact of existence into a crucial juncture for the agent's practice and the formation of virtue.

**Keywords:** mindfulness of death, awareness of death, virtue formation, Aristotle, practical philosophy

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## 1. Introduction

How to live a life worth living is a core question that practical philosophy has continuously attended to. Whether it is Aristotle's discussion of happiness and virtue or Buddhism's exploration of cultivation and liberation, both involve the question of how the agent shapes itself through practice. In this process, death signifies not only the termination of life but also reveals the finitude of human existence, thereby influencing the agent's value judgments and the direction of its action. This question is especially prominent in Aristotle's theory of tragedy and the Buddhist method of mindfulness of death. Tragedy, by presenting the actions of characters in the face of suffering and destruction, provokes the audience's reflection on action, responsibility, and value; mindfulness of death, by continuously contemplating death and impermanence, prompts the practitioner to adjust its conduct and direction of cultivation. Though their paths differ, both show that death is not merely the boundary of life but may also become a crucial juncture for the transformation of the agent's practice. Taking the Buddhist practice of mindfulness of death as its principal object of study and drawing on

Aristotle's theory of tragedy as a comparative reference, this paper investigates how the awareness of death enters the agent's practice and influences the formation of virtue.

## 2. Virtue, happiness, and death in Aristotle's practical philosophy

To understand how tragedy and mindfulness of death can stimulate virtue, the people must first return to the cornerstone of Aristotle's practical philosophy, namely the framework of virtue ethics that he constructs in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The core concepts of this framework are happiness (Eudaimonia), virtue (Aretē), and practical wisdom (Phronesis).

Aristotle's ethics understands human action in terms of a structure of "end" (τέλος). The opening of the *Nicomachean Ethics* states: "Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and choice, is held to aim at some good" [1]. Thereby, the question of ethics is no longer whether action occurs, but what form of life action ultimately points toward.

In this sense, Aristotle further asks whether there exists a highest good that is pursued for its own sake and that gives meaning to all other pursuits. His answer is "happiness" (εὐδαιμονία). It should be noted that eudaimonia is not equivalent to happiness, contentment, or psychological well-being in the modern sense. Aristotle explicitly emphasizes that happiness is not a state of emotion but an "activity of the soul in accordance with virtue" (ἐνέργεια), and further states that this activity should unfold "in a complete life" [1]. Yu Jiyuan points out that Aristotle's concept of happiness is not subjective satisfaction but the realized state of the human function (ergon) in actual life [2]. Virtue is not an additional condition external to happiness, but the internal structure through which happiness is realized. This definition implies that happiness is not something obtained by chance, but a form of life formed through sustained practice. Only in this sense does the question of happiness enter practical philosophy, rather than belonging merely to satisfaction in the psychological sense.

If happiness is the ultimate end of human beings, then the further question becomes what capacity enables the agent to realize this end. Aristotle's answer is virtue (ἀρετή). Aristotle does not first understand virtue in the sense of moral evaluation; rather, he understands it as an excellent state that enables a being to fulfill its function well. He states: "Each virtue, then, both brings into good condition the thing of which it is the virtue, and also enables its work to be done well" [1].

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle further distinguishes virtue into intellectual virtue and ethical virtue. The former is acquired chiefly through teaching, while the latter is formed through long-standing habit [1]. This distinction means that virtue is neither an innate capacity nor something accomplished merely by the accumulation of knowledge; rather, it is a stable character gradually generated in the course of action. As Aristotle says: "We become just by doing just deeds, temperate by doing temperate deeds, brave by doing brave deeds" [1]. Therefore, the formation of virtue cannot be understood as the agent first mastering knowledge of the good and then acting upon it; on the contrary, it is precisely through continuous action, repeated practice, and sustained correction that the agent gradually shapes the corresponding structure of character. Virtue thereby exhibits a distinctly practical character.

Furthermore, Aristotle explains the realization of virtue through the principle of the "mean" (μεσότης) — by which is not meant eclecticism or a numerical average, but rather that the agent is able, in light of the concrete situation, to make the appropriate judgment and thereby find, between excess and deficiency, the mode of action that meets the requirements of practice — and the capacity that determines this appropriateness is practical wisdom (φρόνησις). Practical wisdom is not responsible for determining the ultimate end of life; it undertakes the identification, within concrete circumstances, of the path to the good. Ethical virtue determines

the direction of life that the agent ought to pursue, while practical wisdom ensures that the agent can correctly implement this direction amid complex situations. It is precisely under the joint operation of the two that happiness ceases to be an abstract goal and is transformed into a continuously unfolding practical life.

Aristotle does not hold that happiness exists entirely independent of actual conditions; he points out that happiness "clearly needs the external goods as well" [1], for the realization of certain noble actions depends on friends, wealth, and suitable social conditions. Hence, the reason death enters ethical discussion is not that it constitutes moral value in itself, but that it signifies the termination of the capacity for action and of practical activity.

In discussing the virtue of courage, Aristotle notes: "Death is the most terrible thing, for it is the end" [1]. Here "the end" means the termination of ethical activity. Since happiness can exist only in actual activity, death means that the agent can no longer continue its practice of virtue. In this sense, what makes death fearful is not pain itself, but that it terminates the agent's possibility of continuing to realize the good life. Precisely because death signifies the boundary of the practice of happiness, it becomes the situation in which virtue is most readily revealed. Aristotle therefore understands courage (ἀνδρεία) as an ethical virtue closely bound up with the experience of death: courage does not eliminate fear, but enables action in accordance with reason even after correctly apprehending the object of fear.

Aristotle notably uses the situation of war to illustrate the typical form of courage: a citizen faces death yet is still willing to act for the sake of a noble end [1]. The crucial point here is not war itself, but that action has the structure of "for the sake of the noble" (τοῦ καλοῦ ἕνεκα). In other words, courage is not a seeking of death, nor a disregard for life, but the persistence in the ethical direction of action even when life may be terminated. Hence Aristotle refuses to understand any behavior that faces death as courage. To end one's own life merely in order to escape poverty, passion, or pain does not constitute virtue, because it lacks the practical judgment concerning a noble end [1].

Thus, in Aristotle's practical philosophy, death appears as both the boundary of the practice of happiness and the situation in which virtue is manifested. Death does not directly produce virtue, yet it forces the agent to answer a question: when life has an end, what action still deserves to be upheld? It is precisely in this sense that reflection upon death does not lead to passivity, but prompts the agent to re-understand what a noble life is. Death thereby becomes an important juncture for testing whether the end of action is truly valuable.

### 3. The cathartic power of tragedy—ethical education in the *Poetics*

If the *Nicomachean Ethics* draws for us the theoretical blueprint of the virtuous life, then the *Poetics* reveals how the ancient Greeks, through tragedy as a public artistic form, sensibly experienced, reflected upon, and cultivated these virtues. Aristotle closely links the *Poetics* with the *Ethics*; he holds that poetry, and especially tragedy, is an important instrument for moral education and for cultivating practical wisdom.

In the sixth chapter of the *Poetics*, Aristotle defines tragedy as "a representation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude ... through pity and fear accomplishing the catharsis of such emotions" [3]. The importance of this definition lies not in classifying tragedy as a literary genre, but in revealing how tragedy, through the presentation of action and its consequences, enables the audience to re-understand the practical situation of human beings. What tragedy imitates is not character itself, but action (πρᾶξις); characters matter because their actions display the choices and consequences of human beings in concrete circumstances.

Tragedy imitates "serious action" (πράξεως σπουδαίας). By "serious" is meant not a solemn subject matter or a miserable plot, but that the action touches upon the fundamental problems of human life. The choices of

tragic characters typically occur in situations that cannot be easily resolved, such as the conflict between familial duty and public responsibility, or between personal judgment and established order. Therefore, the ethical significance of tragedy lies not in its providing moral lessons, but in its forcing the audience into the complexity of action and prompting a rethinking of what choice can be deemed reasonable or noble.

Aristotle holds that the ideal tragic character is neither a thoroughly good person nor a wicked one, but someone between the two. Such a figure usually possesses a certain virtue and social standing, and its fate therefore more readily draws the audience's attention and sympathy. Moreover, the misfortune of the tragic character does not stem from evil or baseness, but from a certain "error" (hamartia) [3]. This error need not be moral in nature; more often it appears as a misjudgment or a deviation in action. Therefore, what tragedy presents is not the retribution of good and evil, but the process by which a human being, under limited conditions, makes choices and bears their consequences. Even a person of good character may fall into misfortune because of misjudgment, and this is precisely the significance of the fate of the tragic character.

It is precisely within this structure of action that tragedy evokes its core emotions—pity (ἔλεος) and fear (φόβος). The audience feels pity not merely out of sympathy for the character's suffering, but because it realizes that the misfortune borne exceeds what is deserved; the audience feels fear not because of the disaster itself, but because it realizes that a similar situation could befall itself as well. Thus, the tragic experience is not emotional contagion, but a practical reflection through which, by means of another's action, one reunderstands one's own situation. Hence the significance of the tragic character lies not in becoming a model of virtue, but in revealing, through its action and its consequences, the finitude of the human being. What the audience gains before tragedy is not a ready-made answer, but a re-understanding of the relation among action, responsibility, and fate.

In the sixth chapter of the *Poetics*, Aristotle states that tragedy, by arousing pity (ἔλεος) and fear (φόβος), brings about the "purgation" (κάθαρσις) of such emotions [3]. As to the concrete meaning of "purgation", later generations have long offered different interpretations: some understand it as emotional purgation, some emphasize its function of cognitive clarification, and others hold that purgation means the proper regulation and education of the emotions. Stephen Halliwell points out that what Aristotle means by purgation is not a mere venting of emotion, but the audience's attainment, through the tragic situation, of a deeper understanding of human action and its circumstances, thereby achieving a reintegration of emotion and cognition [4]. Jonathan Lear likewise holds that the significance of the tragic experience lies not in the release of emotion itself, but in the audience's re-cognition, through pity and fear, of the relation between action and consequence, thereby gaining the capacity to reflect upon its own situation [5]. In this sense, tragedy does not merely aim to arouse emotion, but guides the audience, through emotional experience, to re-understand the action of the characters and its consequences. In pity and fear the audience realizes that even a person of good character may fall into misfortune because of misjudgment. Nussbaum further points out that the important value of Greek tragedy lies precisely in revealing the fragility of the good life: the virtuous life of the human being is not entirely under its own control, but is always exposed to chance and external conditions [6]. Precisely for this reason, the emotions aroused by tragedy are no longer mere transient psychological reactions, but become an important juncture for the audience to reflect upon the relation among action, responsibility, and fate. Emotional experience thus enters into the understanding of practical life and provides an important condition for the formation of practical judgment. Aristotle also defines "suffering" (πάθος) as an action of a destructive or painful nature, such as death, injury, and the occurrence of intense pain [3]. Yet suffering is not an emotional effect attached from outside the action, but an important component of the structure of tragic action. The reason death occupies an important place in tragedy is not merely that it has a strong sensory impact, but that it reveals the irreversibility of the consequences of action. Whether it is the

conflict over the burial in *Antigone* or the reversal of fate after the revelation of truth in *Oedipus Rex*, both show that what tragedy truly concerns is not death itself, but how a human being understands its own action when facing consequences that cannot be undone.

Therefore, the significance of the tragic character lies not in whether it ultimately survives, but in how it faces the consequences of action. The characters in tragedy often cannot completely avoid destruction, yet still must make judgments and choices in limited circumstances. As the audience watches this process, it gradually realizes that action does not always lead to a satisfactory result, and that even a virtuous person may meet with failure because of situational constraints or misjudgment. It is precisely in this sense that tragedy reveals the finitude of human action. It does not directly produce virtue, but prompts the agent to rethink what action deserves to be upheld, what responsibility deserves to be borne, and how a human being ought to live in a finite life; only when this reflection further enters actual practice can the tragic experience be transformed into practical wisdom. Nussbaum holds that the significance of Greek tragedy lies in revealing the fragility of the good life [6]. The virtuous life of the human being is not built upon entirely controllable conditions, but is always exposed to chance and fate; from the perspective of practical philosophy, this fragility can be further understood as the manifestation of finitude.

#### **4. The Buddhist method of mindfulness of death—an inner practice toward awakening**

In contrast to the tragic experience, which guides the agent to face death through the public theater and aesthetic narrative, the Buddhist "mindfulness of death" (*marāṇasati*) is a method of cultivation centered on inner contemplation. It is not merely a conceptual reflection upon death, but, through the continuous recollection of the inevitability of death and the fragility of the conditions of life, enables the practitioner to readjust its own structure of desire, sense of time, and direction of practice. Thus mindfulness of death can be understood as a method of cultivation that takes the awareness of death as its medium; its significance lies not in producing fear, but in transforming the experience of death into a practical impetus toward liberation.

The theoretical premise of the method of mindfulness of death is Buddhism's basic understanding of "impermanence" (*anicca*). By impermanence is meant not merely that life is brief or that all things flow and change, but that all conditioned phenomena (*dhammas*) composed of causes and conditions are in a state of arising and perishing, and cannot be taken as permanent, stable, graspable entities. Gethin holds that impermanence is not a metaphysical proposition of Buddhism, but possesses practical significance first and foremost; it requires the practitioner to readjust its understanding of life and desire [7]. Hence the significance of mindfulness of death lies not in death itself, but in the transformation of the structure of value. It is precisely in this sense that death is not an event that accidentally befalls life from without, but the concentrated manifestation of the impermanence of conditioned phenomena. For the practitioner, the finitude of life is not merely a sentimental fact, but an important entry point for breaking the "view of permanence" (*sassata-ditṭhi*) and the attachment to self. The reason human beings continuously generate suffering in the cycle of birth and death is not merely that death itself is frightening, but that the agent mistakenly regards impermanent things as permanently possessable, and on that basis gives rise to attachment and unwholesome conduct.

Therefore, what Buddhist mindfulness of death targets is not the fact of death itself, but the agent's forgetting and obscuring of death. Ordinary consciousness usually assumes that life will continue, thereby leading one to mistake finite time for a resource that can be infinitely disposed of; this erroneous assumption easily causes the agent to fall into heedlessness (*paṃāda*) and fail to turn promptly to cultivation. In Buddhist soteriology, the absence of the awareness of death is closely linked to "heedlessness". Heedlessness is not

laziness in the ordinary sense, but a lack of vigilance toward the fact of impermanence, and thus an inability to restrain bodily, verbal, and mental conduct in time. Thereby, mindfulness of death first possesses an ethical function of alertness: it makes the practitioner aware that the conditions of life are not stable, thereby prompting it to re-examine whether its present conduct accords with the direction of liberation. Hence the purpose of mindfulness of death is neither to indulge in the imagination of death nor to use the idea of death to oppress real life, but, through the continuous recollection of the certainty of death and the uncertainty of its moment, to weaken the agent's misapprehension of the permanence of life; it transforms death from a future event to be avoided into a reminder for present cultivation.

On the level of method, the Visuddhimagga gives a relatively systematic account of mindfulness of death. Buddhaghosa includes mindfulness of death among the recollections (*anussati*); its essential point is not to imagine the scene of death itself, but, through the repeated recollection that "death will come, the life-faculty will be cut off", to keep the practitioner continuously vigilant toward the impermanence of life. That is to say, mindfulness of death is not an occasional impression of death, but a trained state of right mindfulness. The Visuddhimagga summarizes eight ways of recollecting death, including the approaching slayer, prosperity and decline, the method of comparison, the body and its many ailments, the weakness of the life-faculty, the absence of continuity, the limited span of life, and momentary arising and perishing, etc. [8]. These methods reveal the impermanence of life from different levels: some emphasize the inevitability of death's approach, some the fragility of the conditions sustaining the body, and some explain, from the perspective of momentary arising and perishing, that life is not a permanent, continuous entity. Therefore, the practice of mindfulness of death is not an abstract admission that "all humans die", but the transformation of this fact into present awareness through repeated contemplation; the key lies in this: death is no longer understood as a remote future event, but becomes the measure for examining present conduct and cultivation.

From the perspective of its aim, mindfulness of death does not take the cultivation of the recognition of death as its end, but takes the regulation of conduct as its goal. By changing the agent's understanding of time, the body, and the value of life, it prompts the practitioner to turn from heedlessness to diligence (*vīriya*), from attachment to renunciation, and from distraction to right mindfulness. Thereby mindfulness of death acquires practical significance. The continuous contemplation of death can weaken heedlessness; it makes the practitioner aware that the time for cultivation is not infinite, thereby heightening the urgency of the practice of morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*). When the practitioner realizes the impermanence of life, its understanding of time changes: finite life is no longer regarded as a resource for satisfying desires, but is understood as the condition for cultivating the right path. For Buddhism, this transformation is concretely manifested in the emphasis on the threefold training of morality, concentration, and wisdom. Morality enables the agent to restrain bodily and verbal conduct; concentration stabilizes the agent's mental activity; wisdom enables the agent to observe, as they truly are, such marks as impermanence, suffering, and non-self. Thus, mindfulness of death does not mean indifference or world-weariness. On the contrary, by weakening attachment to impermanent things, it enables the agent to reduce the distress arising from possession, loss, and comparison. The calm here is not emotional numbness, but a capacity for awareness grounded in the contemplation of impermanence.

At the same time, mindfulness of death is not merely the overcoming of the fear of death. Its more important function lies in changing the relation between the agent and death: death is no longer only an object to be rejected, but becomes a condition of cultivation that prompts the agent to examine its present state of life. From the ethical level, the reason mindfulness of death can promote the formation of virtue is not that the idea of death possesses moral force in itself, but that the awareness of death changes the agent's understanding of the consequences of conduct. When the practitioner recollects death, it realizes that life is brief and that karmic

results succeed one another, and therefore more readily maintains vigilance over bodily, verbal, and mental action, and puts the abandonment of evil and the cultivation of good into sustained practice.

In sum, mindfulness of death can be understood as a practice of cultivation centered on the awareness of death. Through the contemplation of impermanence, it awakens the agent from its misapprehension of the permanence of life, and further accomplishes the adjustment of conduct and consciousness in the practice of morality, concentration, and wisdom. In this respect, death does not directly generate virtue; what truly plays a role is the revaluation of value and the reorientation of practice triggered by the awareness of death. Therefore, the significance of mindfulness of death lies not in "embracing death", but in re-understanding the practical direction of life by taking death as a boundary. It turns finitude from a merely negative limit into an important condition for the practitioner to restrain conduct, clarify value, and move toward awakening.

## 5. The transformative mechanism of the awareness of death and the formation of virtue

The preceding sections have examined, respectively, Aristotle's theory of tragedy and the Buddhist method of mindfulness of death. Although the two belong to different intellectual traditions, both reveal the possible path by which the awareness of death enters the agent's practice. The question truly at issue here is not whether death can produce virtue, but how death, through the agent's practice, is transformed into the driving force of virtue formation. Death itself has no direct ethical productive function. The reason death possesses practical-philosophical significance lies not in the fact of its being the end of life, but in that it reveals the finitude of the human being and prompts the agent to re-examine the existing order of value. The awareness of death does not directly bring about the formation of virtue; only through the generation of the consciousness of finitude, the re-examination of value, and sustained practical training can it exert an actual influence on the agent's virtuous development. In this respect, death is not the source of virtue, but the triggering condition of finite practice.

### 5.1. How the awareness of death enters the agent's practice

Death is first of all a fact, but the fact itself does not automatically possess ethical significance; only when the agent understands death as an intrinsic condition of its own structure of life does death enter the horizon of practical philosophy. MacIntyre points out that human practice is always unfolded within limited historical situations [9]; although the finitude here is not limited to the historical finitude in MacIntyre's sense, it likewise emphasizes that the agent cannot unfold its practice apart from concrete circumstances. The importance of death lies precisely in its concentrated revelation of this structure of limitation.

What the tragic experience presents is not death itself, but the manifestation of finitude. Through the connection among action, error, and consequence, the audience realizes that human practical activity is always constrained by conditions that cannot be fully controlled. Death thereby ceases to be merely the end of life, and becomes the boundary situation in which the agent recognizes its own finitude.

The Buddhist method of mindfulness of death likewise takes death as the entry point for revealing finitude. But unlike tragedy, which witnesses the fate of the other, mindfulness of death requires the practitioner to incorporate death directly into its own contemplation. The teachings on mindfulness of death in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* repeatedly emphasize that the practitioner should recollect that death may come at any time and should not suppose that life can still be maintained for long [10]. Analayo points out that the important function of the practice of mindfulness of death lies not in cultivating the idea of death, but in arousing a sense of urgency in cultivation, thereby promoting non-heedlessness (*appamāda*) [11]; this interpretation corroborates the relevant records of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*. The *Visuddhimagga* also lists mindfulness of death among the recollections,

and through contemplations such as "death will come, the life-faculty will be cut off", enables the practitioner continuously to perceive the fragility of the conditions of life [8]. Here, death is no longer understood as an event that occurs only at some future moment, but becomes the condition for the practitioner to examine its present state of life.

From this it can be seen that neither tragedy nor mindfulness of death simply tells the agent that "human beings die", but brings the fact of death into the agent's experience in different ways. Tragedy reveals finitude through the failure of another's action; mindfulness of death reveals finitude through the contemplation of the impermanence of one's own life. Both jointly show that the reason death possesses practical-philosophical significance lies not in itself as the end of life, but in that it makes the agent realize that its own action is never unfolded under conditions of infinite time and complete control.

The reason the consciousness of finitude can enter practical philosophy lies not in its producing a transient fear in the agent, but in its shaking the agent's original order of value. In daily life, the agent usually assumes that future time will continue, and on that basis arranges its desires, interests, and aims of action. It is precisely under this presupposition of ample time that objects such as wealth, power, reputation, and bodily enjoyment are easily assigned excessive value. Yet when the agent realizes that the time of life is not infinite and that the consequences of action cannot always be withdrawn, the original order of value is challenged.

In Aristotle, this shaking of the order of value appears as a renewed questioning of "what is worthy of choice". Aristotle's ethics always understands human action in a teleological manner; if human action always points toward some good, then the question raised by the awareness of death is: under conditions where life is finite and action is irreversible, what good still deserves to be pursued? The reason tragedy can arouse pity and fear is precisely that it enables the audience, in the destruction of the character, to see the seriousness of value choice. What the tragic character faces is not an ordinary trade-off of interests, but a conflict involving fundamental values such as responsibility, order, kinship, the city-state, and dignity. The audience thereby realizes that action does not merely serve immediate desire, but must undergo the test of the noble, of responsibility, and of consequence.

In the Buddhist method of mindfulness of death, the shaking of the order of value appears as the weakening of the view of permanence and of greed-attachment. Buddhism holds that all conditioned phenomena composed of causes and conditions are in a state of arising and perishing, and cannot be taken as permanent, stable, graspable entities. The *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* states that the five aggregates are all impermanent, and what is impermanent is suffering; whatever is impermanent, suffering, and changing should not be grasped as "self," "mine," or "my essence" [12]. Death, as the concentrated manifestation of impermanence, makes the practitioner realize that body, wealth, status, and even life itself cannot become a final refuge. Thereby the original order of value, built around possession, continuity, and ego-centrism, is shaken.

Yet it must be emphasized that the consciousness of finitude does not necessarily lead to virtue; it may also lead to nihilism or *carpe diem*. Therefore, between the consciousness of finitude and the revaluation of value there is no natural necessity; what truly plays a role is the framework of practical interpretation in which the agent is situated. Tragedy understands death within a framework of action, responsibility, and the noble end; Buddhist mindfulness of death understands death within a framework of impermanence, karmic result, and liberation. It is precisely these frameworks that keep the awareness of death from lingering at fear or nothingness, and enable it to be transformed into a re-examination of the order of value.

## 5.2. Revaluation of value and practical reorientation

The shaking of the order of value is not equivalent to the revaluation of value. The former only indicates that the original structure of value is impacted, while the latter means that the agent begins to re-judge what

possesses higher practical significance. Therefore, the revaluation of value is not a mere psychological feeling, but the agent's rearrangement, under the consciousness of finitude, of the aims of life and the measure of action.

In Aristotle, the revaluation of value triggered by the awareness of death does not take death itself as value, but prompts the agent to rethink what kind of life is worth pursuing within a finite life. The tragic experience, by presenting the relation among action, responsibility, and consequence, makes the audience realize that contingent interest and immediate pleasure are not the highest ends, and thereby re-examine the value of the virtuous life. The revaluation of value in Buddhist mindfulness of death, by contrast, is oriented toward the practice of liberation. Through the continuous contemplation of death and impermanence, the practitioner gradually weakens its attachment to worldly desire and to the possession of life, and understands finite life as the condition for cultivation and liberation. The value of life therefore lies not in the prolongation of possession, but in accomplishing self-transformation by means of finite life. Although the two respectively point toward the virtuous life and the practice of liberation, both show that the awareness of death, by revealing the finitude of life, enables the agent to readjust its ranking of values and to turn toward some higher practical goal.

Yet the revaluation of value alone is still insufficient to form virtue. Even if the agent realizes that some value is more important, it may not be able to implement this realization in actual action. Only when value judgment enters sustained practice can it be transformed into a stable character. In Aristotle, this transformation depends on the formation of habit and the development of practical wisdom. Although the tragic experience cannot directly shape virtue, it can, by presenting the complex structure of action, deepen the agent's understanding of circumstance, responsibility, and consequence, and provide experiential resources for the formation of the capacity for practical judgment. The Buddhist method of mindfulness of death, for its part, more directly transforms the awareness of death into the driving force of cultivation. Through the continuous contemplation of death and impermanence, the practitioner constantly strengthens its own consciousness of the finitude of life, and in long-term practice overcomes heedlessness and moves toward diligence. Death thereby becomes not merely a cognitive object, but an important juncture for propelling the agent's sustained cultivation.

Therefore, the key from the revaluation of value to practical reorientation lies in whether the agent possesses a practical mechanism capable of bearing value judgment. Aristotle accomplishes this transformation through habit and practical wisdom, while Buddhism accomplishes it through non-heedlessness and the practice of cultivation. Though their paths differ, both show that only when the awareness of death enters sustained practice can it exert a stable influence on the agent's character.

### 5.3. Finite practice and the formation of virtue

The formation of virtue is not accomplished in a single moment, but is the result of the long-term sedimentation of practice. The awareness of death itself cannot directly manufacture virtue, nor can the revaluation of value immediately change the agent's character. Only when the agent continuously adjusts its desires, judgments, and modes of behavior in repeated action can virtue gradually take shape.

For Aristotle, the formation of virtue cannot be separated from the reasonable guidance of the emotions and actions by practical wisdom. The significance of the tragic experience lies precisely in that, by presenting the failure of action in limited circumstances, it enables the agent more deeply to understand the relation among judgment, responsibility, and consequence, and continuously to rectify its own measure of action in actual practice. Tragedy itself does not directly generate virtue, yet it can provide important experiential resources for the development of practical wisdom.

Unlike the tragic experience, which promotes the formation of virtue through the maturation of practical judgment, the Buddhist method of mindfulness of death mainly accomplishes the self-shaping of the agent through sustained cultivation. The awareness of death constantly strengthens the practitioner's consciousness of the finitude of life and pushes it to adjust its structure of conduct and consciousness; it is precisely in this process of continuous transformation that the awareness of death is gradually transformed into a stable cultivated character.

By "the formation of virtue" is not meant the forcible subsumption of Buddhism under Aristotle's virtue ethics, but a reference, from the perspective of practical philosophy, to a more general structure of character generation: through sustained training, the agent stabilizes a certain understanding of value into a tendency to act. Aristotle calls this virtue and practical wisdom; Buddhism manifests it as the cultivated character shaped by non-heedlessness, diligence, and the threefold training of morality, concentration, and wisdom. Their theoretical aims differ, but both acknowledge that stable character is not automatically produced by ideas, but is gradually formed in practice.

From the above analysis it can be seen that, although Aristotle's theory of tragedy and the Buddhist method of mindfulness of death belong to different traditions, both jointly reveal a structure that may be called "finite practice". By finite practice is not meant the agent's passive admission that life is finite, but the process by which the agent transforms the finitude revealed by death into the revaluation of value and sustained practice. Finite practice is not an original concept of either Aristotle or Buddhism, but an analytic concept proposed on the basis of comparative study, used to reveal the common structure by which the awareness of death enters the agent's practice in the two traditions.

Within this structure, death is not the direct source of virtue, but the triggering condition that awakens the agent from its everyday state of obscurity. When the agent realizes that life does not continue indefinitely, the goals formerly taken for granted begin to be questioned. Whether wealth, reputation, or the satisfaction of desire still deserve to be pursued preferentially becomes a question that must be answered anew. It is precisely in this process that the agent gradually adjusts its direction of action and, in long-term practice, forms the corresponding character. Thereby the awareness of death can become the juncture for the formation of virtue.

This understanding can also respond to the question of why the awareness of death does not necessarily lead to nihilism. The awareness of death itself does not guarantee an ethical outcome; it may lead to nothingness, to indulgence, or to escape. Only when the awareness of death is placed within a specific practical framework can it acquire a positive ethical direction. Tragedy, through the imitation of action and the catharsis of emotion, brings the awareness of death into practical judgment; Buddhist mindfulness of death, through the contemplation of impermanence and the practice of the threefold training, brings the awareness of death into the process of cultivation. Therefore, the ethical significance of the awareness of death comes not from the fact of death itself, but from how the agent interprets, bears, and transforms, in practice, the finitude revealed by death.

From this angle, the comparative study here does not stop at pointing out that both tragedy and mindfulness of death involve the awareness of death, but aims to reveal the common practical structure behind the two. Tragedy can be understood as the externalized practice of the awareness of death: the agent, by witnessing the fate of the other, understands the finitude of action within an aesthetic distance. Mindfulness of death, by contrast, can be understood as the internalized practice of the awareness of death: the agent, by contemplating its own impermanence, adjusts desire, conduct, and consciousness in the process of cultivation. Both show that the philosophical significance of death lies not in its ending life, but in its compelling the agent to ask anew: in a finite life, what kind of life is worth pursuing, what kind of action is worth upholding, what kind of character is worth forming.

Therefore, what this paper ultimately seeks to show is this: death is not a mere boundary of practical philosophy, but can become its starting point. Only through the mediation of the consciousness of finitude, the revaluation of value, and practical training can the awareness of death enter the process of virtue formation. In this respect, the true significance of the awareness of death is not to teach one how to face death, but to prompt the agent to re-learn, within a finite life, how to live.

## 6. Conclusion

Departing from the perspective of practical philosophy and comparing Aristotle's theory of tragedy with the Buddhist method of mindfulness of death, this paper has examined the question of how death enters the agent's practice and influences the formation of virtue. Death itself does not directly generate virtue, nor does its significance lie in the fact of being the end of life; rather, it lies in that it reveals the finitude of the agent's existence. It is precisely on the basis of the consciousness of finitude that the agent can re-examine the existing order of value and, through sustained practice, accomplish the shaping of character.

Aristotelian tragedy provokes reflection on action and value by witnessing the fate of the other, while Buddhist mindfulness of death advances the practice of cultivation by contemplating its own impermanence. Though their paths differ, both jointly show that between the awareness of death and the formation of virtue there is no direct causal relation; rather, it is only through such links as the revaluation of value and practical training that it can take effect.

On this basis, this paper proposes the analytic concept of "finite practice" to explain how the awareness of death can be transformed from a mere fact of existence into a crucial juncture for the agent's practice and the formation of character. The awareness of death does not naturally possess a fixed ethical direction; its significance depends on how the agent understands and responds to finitude. Thereby the philosophical significance of death lies not only in revealing the end of life, but more in prompting the agent to re-think what kind of life is worth pursuing, and continuously to shape itself within a finite life.

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