

**Freedom to Die:
Approaching Amida in a State of Grace
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This chapter combines three sources: The first is what I know from firsthand experience. The second is the available literature, or at least that portion of it that I have perused, some of which is based upon empirical observation. The third is the Buddhist and especially the Pure Land tradition. I have written this chapter with an intention to take the Buddhist paradigm of death, birth and rebirth seriously. This has been a considerable challenge since very little of the available literature on the subject these days takes the afterlife or previous lives seriously, though some does, and I have found it immensely valuable to do so. Of course, if one made different assumptions one might come to different conclusions.

It is also worth saying that in much of my writing in recent years I have been concerned to adopt the position that Pure Land teachings should not be regarded as something separate from the mainstream of Buddhism nor treated as a later development, but rather to attempt to see the whole corpus of Buddhist texts through Pure Land eyes. If the re-centering of one's life around entrustment to other-power (*Tariki*) is the unique and essential path, then it must have been the path of Shakyamuni Buddha. If it was his path, then all of his teachings, not just a select few of them, must be comprehensible from this perspective. I do not claim to have completely solved every problem that this approach throws up, but I do feel that it is productive and much more viable than some might at first assume.

Introduction

We are all dying. In one sense, care of the dying is no different from the general altruism that Buddhism engenders throughout life toward all beings. Or, to put the same thing differently, all spiritual care is care carried out within a perspective that recognizes that the here and now existence is not all that there is to the person before one. I realize immediately that in saying this I am separating myself from one section of Buddhist opinion - a section that is particularly prevalent in the West - that would strongly, I would say, over-dogmatically, assert that the so called "here and now" is "all there is" and would further assert that this is the teaching of Buddha, all else being superstition. At one stage in the development of my understanding, when I was under the influence of certain popular teachers, I held that position myself. I now regard the more radical versions of it (this moment is the only thing that is real) as untenable and the more

general versions (this life is the only life, when you are dead that is the end of you) as unlikely. In any case, I am convinced that this was not the view of Shakyamuni Buddha who, I am confident, believed in an afterlife, believed that confidence about it aided one in living a wholehearted life here and now and that doing so enhanced one's future prospects. For him, there was no contradiction between teaching faith about the future and wholehearted commitment to the now. In moving to my current position, however, I am not only rejecting what I regard as unwarranted assertions, I am also returning to a position closer to my own experience which includes a number of significant occurrences that might be classified as mystical.

Leaving that digression, the point is that spiritual care of the living always has their mortality in view and, in a Buddhist perspective, will have, at least tacitly, a perspective that encompasses a much longer span than that demarcated by the birth and death of this particular life time. Bodies are mortal, but spirit refers to something enduring in some sense, not as an entity, perhaps, but as a karmic continuity certainly.

Nonetheless, the transition at the end of a life is generally a momentous thing for all concerned. In principle there may be some highly realized beings for whom dying is no more significant than hewing wood and drawing water, but I have not met them, even among those who are regarded as great teachers in our current age. Death is a special time, even when it is taken blithely, as it may be. In fact, it probably expresses the spiritual truth better to say that for those who are spiritually advanced it is the hewing and drawing that also become special rather than the dying that becomes ordinary.

My general thesis is that there are two main things that are important at the end of life. One is to feel a sense of forward direction and expectation. The other is to be free to depart from this life. The first may arise naturally if the second is taken care of, but not always. Many people die while still tied to this life in a wide variety of ways including unfinished business, guilt, unhelpful convictions, anxieties about the situation and the people they leave behind, and ingrained attitudes that have hindered them throughout life. A good death is hindered by things that obstruct leaving this life, and, ideally, a dying person benefits from a special environment at this liminal time in which to complete whatever business there may be. This is a time for significant last contacts with relatives and friends who come not simply to pay last respects but to engage with the dying person before and at the crucial time.

Of course, many deaths occur untimely and unexpectedly, and we commonly hear, as a spiritual injunction, the reminder that death can come at any time. This is intended to give urgency to the spiritual life, but, I suspect, since it is given so often, this call to urgency has itself become routine. There seems to me to be a greater danger than an unexpected death, that is a meaningless one or one that marks the end of a meaningless or mistaken life.

A meaningful death would be a *samadhi*, but most deaths are probably routine and a minority are tortured or shocking. Shocking deaths are unexpected and often traumatic. Tortured deaths are the deaths of those who go still fighting against what is happening, without acceptance. Such deaths are not uncommon. The commonest case, however, is probably the stuporous death that I shall here frame as "routine."

In passing, I should like to voice some degree of dissent from the common idea that fear of death is the fundamental form of all fears. This is a common idea - that fear in all its forms is actually a symbolic or displaced representation of fear of dying. Rather, I am inclined to see the basic fear as the fear that we have either missed the point of our life or failed to fulfill it in some way. The fear of untimely death is essentially the panic that death will come before one has had a chance to do what needed to be done. If life is viewed spiritually, then that is a spiritual project and life requires to be given purpose. It is a special trust given to us. This notion of inherent meaningfulness and purpose is found, for instance, in the common conclusion of accounts where Shakyamuni in one of his favorite modes of teaching describes the career of an exemplary monk and ends: "The holy life has been led, done is what had to be done."¹ The meaningfulness of life is inherent in the sense of an existential demand, but that demand is not necessarily met and some measure of shortfall is normal.

If samadhi is the opposite end of the spectrum from existential terror, then most people live and die in avoidance of both in a state of ordinary entrancement. In Buddhism this is called *samjna*, and I will give a brief exposition of relevant Buddhist psychology concepts below. There are degrees of samadhi and degrees of terror, but I suggest that these are the primary dimensions we are working with. As it says in Chapter Four of the *Pratyutpanna Samadhi Sutra*, "If during the great terror, at the very end, they possess this samadhi, they will have no fear."² But, the common case is that in which terror is warded off by living in a condition which excludes the sublime in the process of averting the abysmal.

Pure Land Perspective on Compassion

The question of preparation and care must address not only the necessary and sufficient conditions for making a good death. It must also address the position of the companion (*zenchishiki*, Skt. *kalyanamitra*), the person or persons who accompany a person in his or her approach to the final hour. Here arises an important issue of relative status. When, in Buddhism, one talks about care, one thinks of *karuna*. Now it is important here to take account of the distinctive Pure Land perspective on this quality. This flows from the view that Pure Land has of the person. All Buddhism recognizes the deluded condition of ordinary beings, but in most self-power (*Jiriki*) schools *karuna* is seen as a spiritual attainment associated with a certain level of spiritual achievement. In Pure Land, by contrast, the practitioner is not encouraged to think of him or herself in such an elevated way. We are all *bonbu*. The *karuna* of the Pure Land practitioner is thus probably better designated as "fellow-feeling" than as "compassion". Although fellow-feeling and compassion are etymologically almost parallel terms, the shift from Latin to Anglo-Saxon introduces a quite different sense of differentials. Compassion is exercised from on high and is close in meaning to pity, whereas fellow-feeling is a form of companionship.

To go again to Buddhist terminology, we are now, therefore, in the area of defining the samadhi of the carer, and here the ideal is surely the samadhi of equality. This is the subject of the 45th Vow where Dharmakara, in the *Sutra of Immeasurable Life*, says: "Oh Blessed One, may I not come to the complete awakening if, when I have done so, bodhisattvas of Buddha lands throughout the ten directions who listen

to my Name should not attain the Samadhi of Universal Equality, and, in that state, be conscious of the innumerable, inconceivable Tathagatas.” This vow also provides a link between the teachings of the Sutra of Immeasurable Life and those of the Pratyutpanna Samadhi Sutra. The Pratyutpanna Samadhi Sutra is concerned with the samadhi in which one is constantly "conscious of the innumerable, inconceivable Tathagatas," and in this vow we see the link between this and the samadhi of equality as we do in the address of Ananda to the Buddha at the beginning of the Sutra of Immeasurable Life where he says,

Oh Blessed One, I do not ever recall seeing the Tathagata so serene, purified, cleansed, and radiant as I do today. This thought occurs to me 'Today the Tathagata dwells in the sphere of most rare dharma! the sphere of buddhas! Today, the One who is the Eye of the World is centered upon what must be done by a guide of the world! Today, the One who is pre-eminent in the world dwells in supreme bodhi! Today, the Honored of the Gods possesses all the virtues of a Tathagata! The Buddhas of the three times contemplate one another.³ Could it be that you are now bringing to mind all the other buddhas? Are you gazing upon the tathagatas, arhants, samyak sambuddhas of the past, the future, and the present? Is that why your august presence shines with such a radiance today?⁴

The samadhi of equality is essentially that stance in life that recognizes that we all stand in the same relation to Amida, that we are all faulty and fallible and yet are all loved with the same exceedingly great love.

Although we may, in a worldly sense, stand in high and low positions in relation to one another, in spirit we are all on one level. This is never more acutely apparent than on the brink of death when all worldly attributions are about to be discarded. Sitting beside a dying person is, therefore, not only a situation in which the carer most acutely needs such an attitude, it is also the situation par excellence in which such an attitude may dawn. Thus, the dying person's presence may well be a faith awakening condition for the carer.

This also means, however, that the carer who enters most fully into the position of companion also become tender and vulnerable. They do not exercise compassion from a position of spiritual immunity. They are touched by fellow-feeling with all the reality and force of knowledge of frailty that that brings. Being with the dying - and even with the dead - is a humbling and equalizing experience that is ruthlessly liberating, causing all the dead burdens of life to be at least thrown into relief and sometimes in whole or part discarded.

Some Buddhist Psychology

Buddhism uses the terms *vedana* and *samjna* to refer to the quality of response that an ordinary person has to life. By contrast, a person of faith is not unsettled by things that occur, but is in a condition of samadhi leading to prajna. Let me elucidate these terms a little from the perspective of Buddhist psychology.⁵ Vedana, sometimes translated "feeling" refers to the

spontaneous reaction, largely visceral, that we have upon perceiving something, that draws us toward it, repels us from it or causes us to consign it to the category "uninteresting." There is an element of knowingness and of reactivity.

Typically, it triggers some degree of what we might call "everyday entrancement" which the texts name *samjna*. The common translation of *samjna* as "perception" seems to me to be misleading as too neutral and generalized. *Samjna* commonly leads on to the process called *samskara* in which we get caught up in elaborating thoughts, ideas, images and sentiments around the focal object that is for the moment holding us in trance.

The awakening of faith transforms a person's psychology. Common factors, such as *vedana*, *samjna*, and *samskara*, are replaced by the so-called rare factors, *samadhi*, *prajna* and *chanda*. *Samadhi* here refers to an encompassing vision of life conducive to entrustment and discernment rather than entrancement. The person in *samadhi* does not react to things in a knee jerk fashion and is open to the wonderment that comes when one does not assume that one knows everything about a situation already. Discernment and entrustment, the main elements of *prajna*, naturally lead to *chanda* (aspiration). To repeat, all this is different language. The person lacking faith protects him or herself within an ambient sense of prejudice and to a substantial degree acts on automatic pilot, running through routines of pre-programmed response to situations; whereas the person of faith is one who is aware of the mystery and wonder of everything that unfolds, tends to treat each situation as new, and instead of relying upon pre-programmed response patterns, relies upon discernment. The *vedana-samjna-samskara* sequence is treated by Buddha in his discourses as a kind of common stupor in which ordinary people pass their days. He seeks to wake them from it into the condition of *samadhi-prajna-chanda* (awe-discernment-aspiration).

I am here using these terms in a technical sense. Sometimes the term *prajna* is restricted to states of wisdom only known to enlightened beings, and *samadhi* is held to refer to high meditative absorptions alone. I am not using the terms in so restrictive a sense, and I am not speaking in black and white terms.

I am willing to admit that all these factors are subject to degrees. I believe that my usage is in line with what is found in the Pure Land Sutras as well as the Pali Canon. The awakening of faith yields liberation from ordinary worldly entrancement. Not in that it abolishes it. Rather in that even though the ordinary feelings continue to flow, the person of faith (*shinjin*) has available a larger perspective that acts rather as a keel does in a boat. Though high winds blow and though the boat responds, it does not capsize.

From a Pure Land perspective, therefore, *samadhi* is the mind of entrustment. This mind of entrustment, however, has numerous different manifestations or consequences. The Pure Land ideal is epitomized in the idea of three *samadhis*: 1) to enter death welcomed by Amida and to trust that welcome (*nenbutsu samadhi*), 2) to be befriended by all the buddhas of the present who stand before one (*pratyutpanna samadhi*), and 3) to regard the transition in a blithe manner as no different from any of the other transitions that one makes in the course of immeasurable time and to dwell in that equanimity (*samadhi of equality*). However, for many people, death is a major or even ultimate terror and the fear of it is a haunting factor throughout their life. Most people avoid

or manage the terrors of life by living in a manner that is substantially unconscious and regulated more by habit and instinct than by real choice.

Clinging seems to have been Buddha's term for a life lacking faith; a way of life where one does not venture boldly, conjuring as it does the image of the infant clinging to mother, or clinging to the side of a swimming pool. In order to go forth these *skandha*, aggregates or common factors, must transform. Different schools of Buddhism offer different ways in which this can happen. In the Pure Land Schools, the emphasis is upon the fact that the necessary transformation is mediated from outside the self. It is a function of realizing that one is loved, ultimately loved by that ultimate Love that we call *nyorai* (Skt. *tathagata*). When such realization occurs the common factors are transmuted into rare factors.

The person of faith views the world in a different manner from the person of fear. Fear, however, also has its place. The real existential fear is not so much fear of annihilation as the fear that one will not be what one is supposed to be.

It is an anguish that may usefully disturb false faith and is, in that sense, preferable to mindlessness. In true faith, perceptions are touched by the hint of eternal life. There is, however, a common form of false faith that is really a species of complacency. All spiritual paths are vulnerable to degeneracy into formalism, and the death time is a testing ground for the genuineness of faith. Here there arises the problematic and complex subject of the spiritual function of doubt and its relation to faith.

Shinran in *Lamenting the Deviations (Tannisho)* says, "I myself do not know, after all, whether the *nenbutsu* is truly the cause of [our] Birth in the Pure Land (*ojo*), or whether it is that karmic act that causes us to sink into the bottomless pit [of Hell]. Even if I were deceived by my teacher Honen, and recite the *nenbutsu*, and then [as a result] fall into the bottomless pit, I should never regret it. For if I were capable of attaining buddhahood by exerting myself in other practices and should then fall into the pit, then I might feel regret at having been deceived. However, since I am incapable of any other practice whatsoever, the pit will surely then be my dwelling place."⁶ This well illustrates the complexity of this relationship. Existential terror is the fear that one has no firm ground for one's life, but the kind of faith that constitutes such a ground has to arise from the desperation of realizing that one cannot have certainty. When religious commitment forms around a belief, and this latter factor is not understood, one does not really have faith, one has complacency.

A certain kind and degree of existential anxiety is, therefore, healthy and might better be called "zest". People approaching death often seem more alive than people in other phases of their life, because it is a time when such complacency is burnt away.

Vedana arises from anxious contact, and this is the common factor, *sparsha*. Buddhist practice is not so much the abolition of *sparsha* as its maturation into the rare factor *smṛti* (*nen*).

The word *smṛti* derives from the word for "remember" or "keep in mind." Shinran could face the uncertainty of destiny by remembering his teacher Honen and, through Honen, Amida Buddha. Although he has difficulty expressing this to his guests, he feels inwardly the confidence that enables him to hold that uncertainty without neurotic fear. We can surmise that this

confidence chimes with something deep and long standing within his experience. The awakening of faith can seem to be an anamnesis, or "unforgetting" as in Plato's theory expounded in the Meno. The person who exercises smṛti is touched by something very deep, something they have long known but long forgotten, which, in Pure Land terminology, is Amida's love. Once they have it again in their heart, like a precious jewel hidden on their person, the knowledge of this great treasure immunizes them, not so much against existential terror as against the possibility of falling completely into the stupor in which one forgets what one's life is about. The highest form of such immunization is to have in one's heart the highest love. Hence, the highest form of relating is called *buddhanusmṛti*, or *nenbutsu*.

Faith

I am, therefore, inclined to see faith as including an ability to live at ease with the unknown without having to be, globally, in a state of stupor (*samjñā*). For sure, ordinary entrancedness will occur as part of the everyday ebb and flow of life, but the person of faith does not completely lose sight of the higher meaning of his or her existence.

This includes being at ease with the future in a way that is independent of what the future might turn out to be - Pure Land or hell, for instance. The person of faith is not thrown back into denial when the future turns out to be other than what was expected. The future includes death. People may be able to cope effectively with life by holding onto fixed beliefs about death.

However, when they enter the realm of death, one cannot be certain that they will encounter exactly what they have predicted for themselves. Belief about the afterlife, therefore, should be understood at several levels.

Simplistically, the person of Pure Land faith might say, "When I die Amida will come for me and take me to the Pure Land of Bliss." However, this assertion may reflect or disguise differences of faith at what I will call the second level. What is true at the second level would only become apparent if what happens in the dying turns out to be different from what was expected. Perhaps Amida does not come, or does not come in quite the form that was anticipated. A person of deep faith will not be troubled, but will say, perhaps, "I am happy to go wherever Amida wants me to go and for Amida to appear in whatever form He/She/It chooses." After all, other-power means that I do not control Amida. Whatever Amida does is a grace.

On the other hand, the person with a narrow, literalist, or shallow faith may be confused, dismayed or lost when things do not unfold exactly according to plan or expectation. It seems very important, therefore, that we cultivate deep faith, not merely shallow faith, in preparation for the great Unknown.

The relationship between faith and belief is thus not as straightforward as might at first appear. A Pure Land Buddhist might believe in Amida and the Pure Land; a Christian might believe in God and Heaven; a Moslem might believe in Allah and Paradise; yet each might have shallow faith or deep faith.

The belief of each might be a way of expressing the fact that he or she is deeply at ease and

willing to accept whatever occurs, or the belief of each might be an expression of a narrow-minded defensive outlook that will collapse in anguish if Amida/God/Allah does not show up in exactly the way demanded. Deep faith, in the sense that I am using the term here, will also, probably, lead the individuals concerned to recognize equivalence between these three doctrines more readily than shallow faith might.

What Nurtures Second Level Faith?

Insofar as deep faith can be nurtured, it would appear to feed most noticeably upon love. The sense of being loved is surely the most conducive condition. Faith has cognitive, affective and emotional components, and it requires to be fed with a reasonably coherent system of beliefs, images and interpretations that are narrow enough to offer support through specific life challenges yet broad enough to allow individual appropriation; ample enough to encourage spiritual exploration yet not so complex as to overwhelm with confusion. These elements, while important and necessary are hardly sufficient, however, if the ambient condition of reliable love is not met.

The time of the approach of death is closely associated with an intensifying of the feeling of love. The Buddhas teach impermanence. It seems to me that there are two ways in which we can understand the significance of this teaching. One way of understanding it is to see it as a desensitization. The way this works is that when something goes wrong, one can say, "Oh, impermanence." The implication is slightly dismissive. It is like saying, "Oh, nothing to be alarmed about, just another instance of what we Buddhists know all about." This usage of the teaching can certainly provide a kind of emotional first aid. It has the danger, however, of leading to insensitivity

There is a second way of understanding the significance of the Buddha's frequent reiteration of *anitya*, *anitya*. *Anitya*, impermanence, most personally, means death - our own death, the deaths of those we know and care about, the deaths of everybody. All sentient beings die. In proximity to death we feel love. If we never died, would we love? We might desire, but would we love? There is a connection between love and death. There is also a connection between love, death and the spiritual realm. Perhaps Buddha taught *anitya* to awaken us to love, to quicken us.

Dimensions of Maturity

We can distinguish intellectual maturity, emotional maturity and spiritual maturity and these three need not necessarily be correlated. A person may be more mature in one domain than another.

Intellectual Maturity

By intellectual maturity we refer to the ability to conceptualize and think clearly, to avoid unwarranted generalization, for instance, and to think things through. Thus, a person who is intellectually mature should be able to reason that even though some deaths he or she has

witnessed were badly handled by those close at hand, this does not mean that all deaths will necessarily be so; or that even though some influential people have said thus and thus about death, this instruction from authority figures is not automatically to be trusted.

Emotional Maturity

Here we refer to the ability to feel deeply and to be moved by sympathy, fear, sorrow, joy and so on, without being overwhelmed. Indeed, emotional maturity appears to be a mean in the Aristotelian sense, since we can distinguish two types of emotional immaturity. On the one hand, there is the type of person who appears to feel hardly anything and remains "a cold fish" no matter what happens. On the other hand, there is the kind of person who seems to be awash with emotion at the slightest provocation. Maturity lies somewhere in the middle.

Spiritual Maturity

Spiritual maturity is the ability to sense a greater meaning in things, to encompass a bigger picture, to stand outside of selfish considerations, and to appreciate the intuitive elements of life. The spiritually mature person has an awareness of faith in the sense that the term is used in this essay.

It should be apparent that a given individual could be mature on one of these dimensions while immature on another. Indeed, the hypothesis put forward by Carl Jung in his work *Psychological Types*⁷ may apply: when a person has developed one faculty sufficiently to get by in life, this may diminish the pressure to develop the others.

Thus, a person who can think things through may have less need to develop emotional sensitivity and vice versa. Again, emotional and intellectual maturity may or may not enhance spiritual maturity. There appears to be no inevitable relationship between these three dimensions. We can see, therefore, that faith may have a different tone or flavour according to the maturity permutation of the person.

Dying in a State of Acceptance and Expectation

According to Pure Land belief those who have faith and who call upon Amida will be received and go on to the Pure Land. However, we can never be certain about our faith or our destiny, even though we may have some confidence.

In fact, in the Pratyutpanna Samadhi Sutra it says that a bodhisattva will not be attached to any particular rebirth and so will go into the intermediate death bardo in a state of perfect willingness, whereas the Sutra of Immeasurable Life says clearly that: living beings inhabiting other worlds who conceive a longing for awakening, who listen to my Name, who set their heart upon being reborn in my Pure Land, and who keep me in mind with settled faith, are assured of meeting me standing before them in full retinue and glory at the time of their death, such death thus being completely free of anxiety.⁸

Evidently both teachings are good. Amida receives those who have faith, and the person of faith dies in faith and willingness, willing to go wherever Amida might deign.

We do not really know what Amida has in store for us, but to be with Amida and do Amida's

work is surely Pure Land enough, whatever the backdrop.

Dying Free from the Burden of Knowledge of Ill Consequences for the Living

When Honen was a child of nine, his father was assassinated by Akashi no Sada-akira. Honen was with his father when the latter died. Before he passed on, Tokikuni said to his son, "Don't hate the enemy, but become a monk and pray for me and for your deliverance." Clearly, it was of great importance to Tokikuni that his son act properly and also that his own death not be the cause of further enmity and strife. Later, according to some accounts, Sada-akira became a disciple of Honen and the rift was healed. We can see from this that one of the tasks in assisting the dying is to put them at ease in such matters. The person needs to be free to depart. If they go feeling that those they leave behind will not act properly or that their death will be a cause for suffering, a seed from which bitter fruit will grow, then the person goes into the next stage looking backward and full of strife and regret; whereas if they feel confident that those left behind are in good heart and that no ill will come from their departure, then they can go blithely to meet what lies ahead. Thus, while the presence of certain key relatives or associates at the bedside of the dying person may be immensely important, it is also not at all uncommon for a dying person to say to a young relative such things as, "Don't spend your time here with me, go and revise for your exams." Of course, what a person regards as ill is subjective and depends upon their maturity constellation. A lesser man than Tokikuni might have thought it proper that his son seek revenge.

Contrition and Coming to Terms with our Bonbu Nature

The message of Honen is that there is hope for everybody. One of Honen's disciples was a warrior named Kumagai Naozane, who later ordained under the name Rensei. He was a brave warrior and had killed many people. His great fear was of going to hell after death. However, when he heard Honen's sermon that even a sinful man could attain salvation through the teaching of the nenbutsu, he was moved to tears and became the Shonin's disciple. However, contrition also plays an important part in this. Tao-ch'o when near to the end of his life was troubled by the thought of his past misdeeds. Tao-ch'o had been a holy master of dharma so his misdeeds might be thought not to have been on the scale of those of Kumagai Naozane. What Tao-ch'o was worried about was such things as the number of small creatures that must have lost their lives as a result of his temple building activities. It was revealed to his disciple Shan-tao, however, that what was needed was for Tao-ch'o to confess to the community: He did so and felt a great peace come upon him.

These two examples illustrate the importance for the dying, and for all of us in anticipation of death, to unburden themselves of heavy memories. All who have lived have killed. Although one may try to live in a very scrupulous way, still it is inevitable that one will have been at least implicated in the deaths of other sentient beings. We will have broken the precepts in all manner of ways. We are *ahunin* (literally "evil person"). Shan-tao himself wrote in his Hymns in Praise

of Birth (Oja raisan): "We have broken all the precepts and rules of conduct, the five precepts, eight precepts, ten precepts, two hundred and fifty precepts, five hundred precepts, bodhisattva precepts, and inexhaustible precepts; not only have we broken these precepts, but also we have incited others to break them, and rejoiced at seeing them do so."⁹

The Buddhist attitude to contrition is, however, somewhat different from the Christian or the Jain one since it does not really revolve around penance. We do not envisage a need to suffer in atonement. Rather we see a need to seriously recognize the extent of our harmful nature. We recognize that one is prone to perform harmful acts, to regret it, and to try to do better. But to do so, in full recognition that one is a being in a world that are both so constructed that one will never be able to live a completely harmless life, is sad.

Spiritual maturity in Buddhism, especially in Pure Land Buddhism, involves seriously taking on this recognition and the grief it entails. This is a foundation of faith. There are thus two levels to contrition. The specific level involves acknowledging specific misdeeds that one has performed and feeling the appropriate emotions. The more important, deeper, general level is the recognition that one is a foolish being, bonbu, always prone to err. It is this latter recognition that leads to fellow feeling, compassion and a sense of ease in relation to others. It is possible to be racked by guilt through the first kind of contrition without ever arriving at the second. In that condition, one is still in the thrall of pride and true faith cannot really enter.

Stages of Adjustment

So Buddhism involves coming to terms with reality in a sober way. The stories of Shakyamuni's encounters with Kisagotami and with Patacara are well known.¹⁰ In each, far from trying to reassure the woman, he rather broadened her appreciation of the ubiquity of death. In the case of Kisagotami, he made her aware that losses are suffered by all people. In the case of Patacara, he said, "In your many lives you have shed more tears for the dead than there is water in the four oceans."¹¹ In each case, he narrows the gap between their life and the presence of death.

Here again, we may well be seeing the fact that to bring out the proximity of death is also to quicken the intensity of love. Kisagotami and Patacara both became enlightened - "the great dark was torn apart" - and they found a universal love.

Patacara, especially, became a leader in the Sangha because of the deep care that she felt for others. It was the fact that they had come so close to the reality of death while in the prime of life that made this possible. Proximity to death is a make or break matter. It either opens a life up to love or closes it down in depression.

The association between love and proximity to death is worth pondering. Are we mortal so that we can know love? Children and old folk may be in a position to love more directly, where people in their prime love via their work in a more indirect way.

While a person is immersed in their life's work, the outcome is uncertain, but, as Kamei Katsu-ichiro writes, "The death of a human being tells his or her life completely. Through a

person's death it becomes clearer what kind of a human being that person was. Then we shed tears of love." Katsu-ichiro goes on to draw the spiritual lesson for the living, "But there is one kind of love that we might call the most profound love in the world, it is this: while we find deep love for a person who has died, if we can feel that kind of love for the person while he or she is still alive, that must be the most profound love."¹²

A number of writers - Elizabeth Kubler-Ross is the best known - have written about the approach to acceptance of death as a series of stages. In this, they are influenced by research on loss and bereavement. The approach to death can be seen as a kind of anticipatory bereavement.

The dying person is going to lose all that they have been attached to in this life. Kubler-Ross gives the stages as: 1) denial, 2) anger, 3) bargaining, 4) depression, and 5) acceptance.¹³ She also adds hope, not so much as a stage, but as a persistent feature running through all the other stages. One could think of these stages as so many layers that isolate a person from love.

However, it would be unwise to assume that these stages are what always characterize all people approaching death. Kubler-Ross's populations were mostly patients who had been given unwelcome news about a fatal illness. The stages she describes are not, I suggest, really to do with death specifically, but are a description of the general human reaction to bad news or loss. Although we commonly talk of dying as "loss of life," it may not actually be the norm for death to be experienced as a loss. The theory of bereavement is, in some respects, Western science's equivalent to the Second Noble Truth - that our response to dukkha, affliction, is often to adopt a strategy that makes more dukkha.

It takes a considerable adjustment to reorient oneself, find faith in the new situation, and thereby discover a more constructive path. Of course, we could see Kisagotami in these terms. She was in denial about the death of her child. She took her bargaining to the Buddha. He gave her a task that took her through a sharing of grief to a position of acceptance. Kisagotami, however, was the bereaved person, not the dying person, and Kubler-Ross's stages are really about loss rather than about dying. Within loss there may be an opportunity to die vicariously, and the dying may have to face loss before they prepare to die. But we should not assume that this is always and automatically the case. The dying are generally more concerned with legacy than with loss, and even more concerned with the miracle of death itself and what it holds.

One can argue that the loss of loved ones is the most terrible pain. So if that is what the living person suffers, must not the dying person suffer it also? After all he or she is also separating. One cannot take one's loved ones with one. However, loss may not be the correct paradigm within which to understand normal death. The dying are often full of life and inspiring rather than depressed or depressing, and by far the majority of reported Near Death Experiences (NDEs) are positive.

Although our culture has only in recent decades begun to emerge from the tendency to classify everything associated with death as depressing, this is not true of the dying themselves for the most part. Even loss itself, when taken fully, is not depressing; it is distressing in the extreme, but in the midst of such distress one feels very alive. Those who work with the dying are more likely to report, as one did to me recently, "I worked with dying people and experienced there

something beautiful, exquisite, and profound."

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Repetition Compulsion and Karma

Although cognitively we have the ability to distinguish between present and past and to recognize the difference between memory and present experience, this appears to be a relatively high-level function, and much of the human organism does not function at this level. In Buddhism, this fact is described through the theory of karma which is the unending tendency for beings to repeat their old dramas until something occurs to break the spell and liberate them from it. In Pure Land Buddhism, we conceptualize this spell breaker as Nyorai's grace.

One way in which the spell of old karma may be broken is through the apodicticity of profound spiritual experience that breaks through and disrupts the ordinary taken for granted life world of the person.

All spiritual experience involves a kind of death in the sense that the old karma drama is the old life, and if it is disrupted, then that old life ceases.

Liberation involves a "death to the old." Physical death seems to be a periodic necessity as life becomes increasingly burdened. The manner in which a person approaches their death is likely to be substantially conditioned by past experience.

In this respect, there are three types of experience that we might consider: one's own previous experiences of death in previous lives; near death experiences in this life; and deaths of others one has witnessed.

Own Previous Deaths

If we take the theory of rebirth as correct, then each of us has experienced dying many times. It may seem a strange word to use, but dying must, in a certain way, have become routine. Some deaths, usually traumatic, may disrupt the routine, but generally, people dying are likely to be rerunning an old script just as much as people doing anything else that occurs repeatedly. The problem here is that most of us have no useful cognitive memory of former deaths. Research into past lives, such as that done at the University of Virginia¹⁴ suggests that ordinary people tend to remember past deaths more commonly when these have been traumatic,¹⁵ and even then, they only remember them as young children. This is perhaps more likely to be because such a death is not routine than because of the trauma as such. However, Buddhist theory suggests that we may well have visceral memory. Indeed, we would have to have some sort of trace, either visceral or imprinted on the subtle mind, and presumably both, for the hypothesis of routine death to be meaningful. If, however, a dying person is simply re-enacting something that they have done

before, they may well be doing it in a relatively mindless way. Probably most people die in a condition of *samjna* rather than one of *samadhi*.

Near Death Experiences

I am aware from my own experience that Near Death Experience can have the effect of removing some or all of the fear associated with dying and can give one a confidence that dying is a process with a future.

In my own case, going into death was a compellingly, interesting, and liberating experience in the course of which all pain and all the past minor responsibilities of life noticeably and consciously fell away. I count this a blessing. Fortunately, research suggests that most Near Death Experiences are similarly benign. Perhaps if a person had had a Near Death Experience of which they had a frightening or disturbing memory, this would impede their ability to die at ease, but in the great majority of cases, such experiences seem to be reassuring or even inspiring.

Witnessed Deaths

Nowadays it is less common to witness a death than it used to be. However, the majority of people reaching the time of their own death will still probably have been present at one or two deaths, usually of close relatives. The nature, manner, and circumstance of the death are likely to leave a strong impression. Thus witnessing one's parent die at peace at the end of a long and satisfying life may be quite different from seeing one's child killed by a passing car, or the lingering death of a young person from a wasting disease. Again, where the death is gradual, the attitude of the dying person is also likely to strongly impress itself upon the witnesses, whether they welcome the arrival of Amida or go raging into the night.

The Western paradigm assumes a materialistic interpretation of death and this shapes perspectives of all concerned to a huge degree. Ernest Becker wrote, "The child has no knowledge of death until about the age of three to five. How could he? It is too abstract an idea, too removed from his experience. He doesn't know what it means for life to disappear forever, nor theorize where it would go."¹⁶ It is possible, however, that the child is closer to death than the adult, not in a theorizing way, and not as an abstract idea, but as recent experience that is closely integrated with their being. I had opportunity to discuss this with Professor Becker and he agreed. Buddhist theory of rebirth suggests not only that a death occurs at the end of life, but also at the end of the intermediate bardo state.¹⁷

This second death precipitates one into life. It is a fresh, raw experience that imparts vigor. We may speculate that the person at the end of life is likely to be in touch with those earliest feelings, again not cognitively or abstractly, but instinctively. Although the old body may be approaching complete uselessness, there may be a sense of impending release. If, at a subtle level, we know that death is release into new domains of life, then this may account for the fact that many people who have spent all their maturity in terror of death, nonetheless go quite easily when the time actually comes.

If children are coming from a death and elderly people are going toward it, then they are both closer to death than people in their prime are. There are, of course, other similarities between the condition of old age and that of childhood that I need not list here. They do, however, include the

fact that it is much easier for both groups to die or be killed than it is for in the case of people in the prime of life. Death of a young child, awful as it may be for the parents, may simply be a regression into a familiar domain for the child, and until the advent of modern medicine, it was extremely common.

It is possible to view life as a journey into the domain of gross physicality, beginning from and returning to the domain of death. This perspective also throws some light upon the Jungian concept of the "mid-life crisis" when the corner is turned, and the person, who has up to that point been journeying away from death, starts the homeward voyage.

If it is the case that many people who die, if they are not dying traumatically are dying routinely, in the sense that they are just doing what they have done many times before, then how is it possible to be of use to such a person?

Laurence LeShan provides a case example that must be typical of many of a relative visiting a dying relative and not knowing what to say.¹⁸

LeShan asked his client, the son, what he knew about his dying mother's childhood. The answer was very little. The client went away and started asking his mother questions. This transformed their relationship in her remaining three months of life. LeShan comments, "What the dying person needs is someone to hear who they are and what their life is and has been." Now, why is this? Why is the life review experience such a common part of the dying process? Is it not because the person needs to take stock and, hopefully, arrive at some assessment? What would be the purpose of that other than to avoid having to do it all again? The person who accompanies the dying person may be part of this process.

They need to be a good and honest listener and not try to be too wise. This is not a time for advice or platitude. It is a time to listen and to join in the repartee of celebrating a life, respecting its triumphs, laughing together at its follies, perhaps weeping together at its tragedies. Generally, the dying person will do his or her own work if there is freedom for it, but, too often, the dying spend their time protecting the living.

Ambient Culture

Received ideas about death, both religious and secular can have a powerful effect upon the death bed situation. They can support and ease the passage of the dying person, or they can impose a straight jacket that makes it impossible for important things to be said with any frankness.

In addition to providing doctrines about whether there is or is not an afterlife and of what kind, they are likely to include questions about whether it is acceptable to express feelings, what should be said and done, who may be with the dying person, and what should happen in the last hours.

Each society has its own idea of what constitutes a good death. In Britain, however, culture has become so diverse that nothing can be taken for granted any more.

People are exposed to many different influences and it is no longer to be expected that all those who gather round the bedside of a dying person will be of similar background culture.

Furthermore, since a large proportion of deaths take place in hospital, the culture of the medical profession may in many cases be the prevailing influence. An unfortunate aspect of this circumstance is that it is not uncommon for there to be a background drama going on around the dying person in which a power struggle takes place over which culture is to prevail. I myself had to use considerable assertiveness skills to ensure that my mother died in her own home and her own bed and not in a hospital ward or emergency department. Those who assist, whether as priests or other professionals, may have a role in mediating and ameliorating some of these struggles.

The sociologist David Clark in his study of funeral rites in Yorkshire, England showed that in the early twentieth century death was a communal affair and everybody in the village was involved; whereas by the 1960s and 70s death had become medicalized, standardized, and isolated from the mainstream of life.

The nadir of this trend seems to have been reached around that time. In the 1960s; death seems largely to have been treated solely as a medical failure. At that time Robert Kastenbaum wrote, "If death constituted the overwhelming fact of life to the man of the Middle Ages, then to us death is... well, shall we say, 'irrelevant'?"¹⁹

He went on to observe, "The average citizen seldom witnesses dying or death. The dying-death sequence is efficiently processed by specialists who perform their functions in special settings."

In those days, it was hardly socially acceptable even to tell a person that they were dying. We have come quite a long way since then, not least because of the work of such commentators as these and the hospice movement that has come in their wake.

However, the medical paradigm, though softened some what in its presentation, still remains one of the dominating influences surrounding the dying person today and those who care must reckon with it.

Greasley et al's study²⁰ published in 2001 showed that while "the domain of spirituality is a vital concern for the majority of [health] service users," it is still the case that "participants felt that spiritual needs are not a priority for medical staff relative to more tangible issues of care."

Studies of this kind have, however, led to an increasing element of awareness training in nurse and medical education and shifting attitudes. There has also been in the UK a shift in government stance away from the totally secular orientation that dominated throughout the twentieth century toward an acceptance of some degree of multi-culturalism which has, for instance, meant a gradually increasing presence of chaplains of diverse faiths within the hospital team.

Liminal Space

The death time as a special time of all important transition involves the appearance of a special kind of space. This may be called sacred space²¹ or liminal space.²² The term liminal comes from the Latin word for "threshold." These terms have been developed by Eliade and by Turner to elucidate the process of ritual transformation, and this usage has been extended by

Moore²³ and by others²⁴ to applications in psychotherapy. The liminal space, par excellence, however, is the death bed.

This is the truly archetypal stage for the great transition. Although modern life has got to the point of recognizing that it is not a good idea for a patient to die on an open hospital ward if possible, we are far short of full recognition of what is actually needed to create optimum conditions for the final act of a lifetime.

Modern thinking raises physical health considerations above almost everything else. However, the dying person does not have the need for extensive health care of that kind, and the multiplication of procedures, "just in case," can become increasingly burdensome as well as irrelevant as the time of death approaches.

The dying person needs a safe space in which to approach the threshold of the next world in safety and in which to do whatever work they still need to do with this world before they go. When my mother was dying it, therefore, seemed entirely right to bring her out of the hospital and return her to her own bed in her own room and to make that room into a special space. There were many flowers and a Buddha figure, and everybody immediately sensed that going into that room was something special. Mother herself had given some instructions about what and who she would need at this time. In part, we have to make a ritual of the process of dying and, in part, the very fact that somebody is dying turns everything into a ritual. They are making the transition and will do so whether we render the conditions conducive or not, but much is gained by doing so. It is a two-way process. The person who is close to death is a kind of bridge for everybody between this realm and the other one. They bring that power into our midst, and we are all touched in one way or another by it. The death chamber is, therefore, a liminal space not just for the dying person, but for everybody who is involved. The more they open to the process the more true this becomes. In the ritual process, a liminal space is first created by having both a focus and a boundary.

As the ritual progresses, the space may transform from an inwardly directed affair to being a foundation from which a breaking out into new life may occur.

In the case of the deathbed ritual, the dying person eventually leaves the circle by entering the death realm. They go onward and the living are left behind. The bereaved then go into another process, the process of grief, from which they eventually emerge remade.

Unsolved Problems

A Conscious or Unconscious Death

The ideal that one gleans from much of the Buddhist tradition is that the person die fully conscious. On the other hand, in contemporary English culture, the ideal that many people would express would be a preference to die in their sleep and know as little about it as possible. Probably most people do actually die in neither of these conditions, but rather pass gradually into a condition of non-communication with those around them. In some Buddhist traditions this is described in terms of a gradual "dissolution" of the elements.²⁵ Is it a problem? Does it matter

whether a person dies conscious or not? Perhaps not.

What is the real relationship between the state of samadhi and death? Shakyamuni Buddha clearly regards the vedana-samjna sequence as a kind of death-within-life in a negative sense. The samadhi-prajna sequence may thus logically be regarded either as the antithesis of death or as a positive form of death-within-life. I am certainly open to the possibility that these could simply be two different ways of saying the same thing. There can be good death and bad death. To make a good death implies not just dying well, but also going into a positive post death realm - ideally the Pure Land or the pan-nirvana of a Buddha, or failing such beatitude, entering the inter mediate bardo in such a frame that one will obtain a good rebirth

We may say that Honen Shonin entered death in such a state of samadhi. In this sense, he was already there. Is such a deathbed samadhi, in some sense an anticipation of death itself?

Chapter Two of the *Dhammapada* begins with the verse:

Appamado amata-padam; pamado-maccuno
padam Appamatta na mi-yanti;
ye pamatta yatha mata

Heedfulness is the path of the deathless;
heedlessness is the path of death.

The heedful do not die; the heedless are as if already dead.²⁶

The term appamado refers to attentiveness, diligence, or not being in the state of samjna. Appamatta refers to what is eternal and is a syn onym of nirvana. As Pure Land Buddhists, it is tempting to equate heedfulness with heeding the call of Amida. This would not be wrong in terms of meaning, although it is not the exact sense of the original phrase which has more the implication of being free from samjna – worldly entrancement.

What frees us from such, however, is Amida's call. And to be in samadhi is also to be free from samjna, not in the sense that samjna no longer occurs, but in the sense that it no longer binds one. The adept can enter into samjna-asamjna. This important phrase is commonly translated as "neither perception nor non-perception," but I have yet to meet anybody who can clearly explain what that is supposed to mean in terms that make sense. Surely samjna asamjna refers to the condition in which one is aware of one's bonbu nature. The samjna part is the bonbu nature. The asamjna part is the awareness thereof. It is that condition sometimes called "having one foot in the river and the other on the bank." This is the stance from which it is best possible to rescue a person washed along in the flood, which, metaphorically speaking, is the role of the bodhisattva. So asamjna is nirvana, but the bodhisattva deploys samjna-asamjna in order to continue to be of use. Samjna is bonbu nature, but the ideal type of Pure Land devotee (myokonin) is samjna-asamjna in the sense of being well aware of his or her own foolish nature.

The point is that to be samjna-asamjna is to be alive to one's own deadness (in the negative sense of death), and it also means to have death (in the positive sense) present to one in the midst

of one's blind passions in life.

The problem is that if dying in full consciousness is regarded as the ideal, then the majority of deaths are failures, and these include the deaths of many people who seem to die at peace and full of faith. There is a certain genre in Britain and America for Buddhist courses on how to help the dying, many of them related to Sogyal Rinpoche's well known work.²⁷

These courses are meditation centered, and it would seem really do more for the carer or physician than for the dying person, if meditation is what they need. Of course, the dying person will benefit from having carers who are more centered, calm and compassionate.

However, I am left still asking whether the practice of mindful awareness is really that highly relevant to the dying person him or herself.

Most people do not die while practicing meditation and teaching meditation to the dying would seem a rather low priority if it has any relevance at all. The importance of conscious dying would seem to remain an open question.

In passing, we can also mention the question of dementia. There has recently been discussion within one British Buddhist forum about this. Some Buddhists clearly feel unsettled by the fact that one could have spent the whole of one's adult life practicing meditation and perfecting the ability to enter particular mind states and then become demented and die not having even the ability to remember what the practice was, let alone perform it. Some felt that this negates the whole basis of what they have been trying to do through their practice. Now this is clearly less of a problem from a Pure Land perspective where faith is not dependent upon such technical ability. Nonetheless, nenbutsu is a form of remembering, and if one's memory is lost, the nenbutsu may be lost with it.

In Britain, dementia affects one person in twenty aged over 65 years, and one person in five over 80 years of age. Are these people embraced by Amida if they cannot remember who Amida is? We are confident that although this might seem a problem from the side of the human spiritual practitioner, it can be no problem from the side of Amida Nyorai whose compassion we believe to be boundless.

The Question of Lament

The question here is whether Buddhism approves of grief. In the Mahaparinibbana Sutta in the Long Discourses of the Buddha (Digha Nikaya) there is the following verse.

And those monks who had not yet overcome their passions wept and tore their hair, raising their arms, throwing themselves down and twisting and turning, crying, "All too soon the Blessed Lord has passed away, all too soon the Well-farer has passed away, all too soon the Eye-of-the-World has disappeared!" But those monks who were free from craving endured mindfully and clearly aware, saying, "All compounded things are impermanent - what is the use of this?"²⁸

A very similar passage is found in the latter part of the Buddhakarita of Ashvaghosha, so this

is not simply a Theravada idea. It seems that there is a widespread idea that if you are advanced upon the spiritual path, you will not weep and lament when a loved person dies. This idea has caused me considerable trouble. It is possible to say that as Pure Land Buddhists we make no claim to be arhants, and so it is natural that we should be amongst those who weep rather than those who remain cool. This seems like half a solution. Perhaps it is simply my own deluded status that makes me inclined to regard the detached stance of the arhants as unhealthy. That is possible. However, I do so regard it.

I am comforted in this by the fact that Shinran Shonin is quoted in Kakunyo's Kudensho as saying, "Sobbing, lamenting together, or even crying out loud at the deathbed of the deceased is no hindrance to Birth in the Pure Land (ojo). We should not criticize people who are lamenting in sadness."²⁹

It has long seemed a weakness of what one might call common Buddhism, that if applied logically, people who were advanced in it would have few feelings and very little would, therefore, matter in their lives.

Now it does seem to be a virtue to be able to take the rough with the smooth in life and, in that sense, to have a resilience and ability to maintain equanimity in difficult situations. There is no doubt that that was a quality that Shakyamuni admired. However, to let that run to the point where one says, "What is the use of this?" when people are weeping over the death of a beloved friend seems an extreme of insensitivity.

A little while ago, I was visiting a Zen Buddhist centre in North America. My hosts were very kind and I had lovely visit which I appreciated very much.

However, my visit happened to coincide with the death time of one of the teachers of the monastery. I found myself feeling quite disturbed that there seemed to be - to my, possibly deluded, eyes - no adequate recognition within the community of the feelings that such a loss naturally occasions. The British used to be teased by members of other nations for their "stiff upper lip" approach to set-backs and tragedies. This is now generally regarded as having been an unfortunate twist in the culture occasioned by the over-whelming impact of the First World War which caused such massive and devastating loss that everybody was in shock. Is it really noble to ignore grief? I think not. I think it is dangerously unwise. Is it really the case that those who reach high spiritual attainment remain unmoved in such circumstance?

Well, if it is, then I am, in my current state of understanding, sure that this is not the kind of attainment that I have any aspiration toward.

I think it is interesting that according to the tradition, Ananda wasnot enlightened, and yet it was Ananda that Shakyamuni wanted as his attendant. If I had been Shakyamuni, I too would have preferred to have had the soft-hearted Ananda as attendant than the supposedly more enlightened alternatives who seem to have been lacking something. Is this not what some of the early controversies in Buddhism boiled down to: that those designated as arhants were not necessarily exemplary in quite the right way?

It all remains an open question, but I would be dismayed if one of the effects of Buddhism becoming more widespread was a diminution of respect for the value and necessity of grief.

The Mobilization of Faith

All spiritual care is, as we have noted, in a sense, care of the dying since we are all mortal and since to be in a condition in which one is ready to depart this life is, in many of the world's spiritual traditions, regarded as being a definition of the spiritual life. The sage lives lightly and is always ready to go. This, therefore, provides one rule of thumb definition of spiritual health.

Of course, there are many kinds of pathology to set against this yardstick, and we all manifest at least some of them. There are those who choose death when manifestly unprepared for it and do so out of despair or anger. There are those who choose life but without any real intention of making anything of it, but simply drift with no sense of the meaning of their existence or even that it has meaning. There are those who choose perverse meanings and devote their lives to causes that are ignoble. Shakyamuni himself, looking back, saw himself as having done so for periods, and his enlightenment can be understood as emergence from such a condition.

It is, in fact, the common lot. We mostly give our lives to things that are not the best we could have done even though they might be the best we could see at the time. When we look back with regret, it might be that we are looking back upon a lack of discernment or it might be a lack of courage. Shakyamuni's case seems to be of the former type, and perhaps that is why he placed so much emphasis upon discernment (prajna) in his teachings. Lack of courage is, however, as Aristotle and many others have pointed out, the common case. Even when people see an opportunity of liberation, they do not necessarily take it. Few have perfect discernment, but there are even fewer who live up to the discernment that they do in fact have. This is why faith is the crucial variable in most lives.

We could say that most people lack faith. I prefer to say that people all have faith, but that they do not necessarily invest it wisely. Most people have invested their faith in things that are impermanent, unreliable, liable to let them down, or simply incapable of supporting them. This category would include all worldly investments as soon as they start to be seen as anything more than utilities. To paraphrase a basic Buddhist formula, we put faith in things impermanent and afflictive and fail to see that the real refuge is not based in our self.

To find a true refuge is the challenge. Of course, putting it this way reduces the faith problem to a discernment problem. If people saw more clearly that the things that they have put faith in - pension plans, relationships, money, and many even more superstitious or idolatrous items - really are all empty of ultimate value, then they might experience a deep spiritual transformation. Most, however, fear that all they would experience is despair. There is no simple cure for this particular blindness. It is to the cure of it that Buddhism is dedicated, but it is a subtle art.

Conclusions

A Good Death

As a person approaches death, they normally turn their attention toward what awaits. It is clear from Near Death Experience reports, including my own, that as one dies one feels one is going

somewhere and toward something. People do not die looking backward. Even those who return to life after an NDE and say that they returned because of attachment to relatives or loved ones generally describe going into the vestibule of death and then being reminded of those left behind. Those around the dying person need, therefore, to take this forward directedness into account and focus upon enabling it. At earlier stages, prior to the final days, they may also need to help a person for whom death may be anticipated to put their affairs in order for similar reasons. There are few things so distressing as the person who is evidently dying wailing about things undone, unsaid and now unachievable. A good death is the death of a person who is prepared and ready, who is at peace with those they leave behind and accompanied to the threshold by love.

A Good Life

Of course, we can say that we are all people for whom death may be anticipated, and so there is wisdom in living one's whole life in a manner such that the leaving of it would not set in train too much inconvenience. We have already noted that readiness to depart is one measure of a spiritualized life. Another is success in finding a noble refuge - something in which one can invest one's energy without the lingering suspicion that one is just wasting time. As a matter of principle, we can, as Buddhists, say that taking refuge in the Triple Gem (Buddha-Dharma-Sangha) is the center piece of a good life, but this then needs to find expression in some actual life work.

Such work may or may not leave worldly monuments behind, but it should at least leave a trace in the heart of those whom it touches.

A Good Accompaniment and Farewell

To be with a dying person who has lived their faith discerningly and now prepares to move on is an inestimable boon. To accompany a person who approaches death full of misgiving and regret is a great trial. To help a person in their latter time to come to faith and discernment is an art that even buddhas have not fully mastered. Yet, with patience, sympathy, and tender care, one can be a valuable presence even when one has very little idea what to do for the best. When my mother was on her deathbed, one day, we had a crisis in which she was choking. By taking emergency action we rescued her from it.

She died peacefully a few days later. A rationalist might say, what difference does it make whether a person dies on Thursday or Saturday, by choking or by dehydration? Yet, it was intuitively very clear to those present that it was good that she died as she did and not the other way; and that saving the life of a dying person, so that she could die properly, had been definitively the right thing to do.

Of course, there is a world of difference between being a professional carer, even a priest, and being a close relative. Yet the carer, if they are to be truly effective, needs a deep appreciation of the perspective of the relative, not just in order to support the relative, but in order to deeply understand the dying process and so be useful to the dying person. Thus, Adrian Debney writes, "For each middle-aged man that I help to nurse, I see potentially my own father. Every thirty-

year-old man who shyly and tearfully approaches me for information about his dying mother could be me. Each young woman admitted for treatment for breast cancer might be my own partner. So walk away as I might at the end of every shift, I can also honestly say that I do so with an awareness of the sanctity of life and of the need for real compassion in each moment."³⁰

Ideally, they need to know what it is like to die themselves. Spiritual practice, deep faith, is essentially such a dying within life so that the greater scale of real life, life in spirit, opens up to one and puts one in a position to accompany all manner of folk as they go through the end time and seek the samadhi.

Do Not Try to Be Too Sure

Being with a dying person is a privilege. It is also a powerful experience. Like all powerful experiences it can go wrong. It has the power to be transformative and liberating both for the dying person and for those who accompany. If honesty or sensitivity are lacking, then it will be less effective, but it is difficult not to be moved at all.

The professional whose work it is to accompany, may sometimes be in danger of burnout or overdosing through having too many such powerful experiences and so may also be in danger of becoming closed down or callous. These are professional hazards for nurses, hospice workers, clergy, and others. Such a closing down seemed to happen in our culture on a large scale in the inter-war years and again in the 1960s and 1970s. We seem to have now come into a relatively more open period, but there is still a long way to go if we are to appreciate the great mystery and all it has to give to us.

My most basic conclusion is that we should not think that we know anything about this subject with finality. Rather we should have the kind of second level faith that is the fullest development of willingness and openness. When we are with the dying or when we are dying ourselves, we should be sensitive and honest. As Ronald Nakasone says, "We must all feel our way from moment to moment. We are all explorers, groping our way through life's uncharted waters, meeting the next unknown moment with a sense of trust, anticipation, and wonderment..."

When we become aware of the essential humanity we all share, we, in essence, tap the limitless store of compassion which sustains the Buddha-body. We draw sustenance from this boundless community of life."³¹

Nakasone here, of course, is sketching out the ideal. In practice, mostly, we are short of it. Mostly living is a series of routines. One of the things I have tried to consider here is the possibility that dying is also routine. Yet routine is part of the birth-and-death-ness (Jaramarana), the ordinary entrancement that Buddha wants to wake us up from. If life is not to have been merely routine, it needs to be known and faced in deep honesty. Being with a dying person may wake one up and being with them in love and openness may also help them to wake up too, but this is always a surprise and not something contrivable. Like all the other really important things in life, it comes like a grace. Such grace comes not to the all-wise for they have their reward already, it comes to bonbu so long as we remember that that is all we are.

References & End Notes

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2. *The Pratyutpanna Samadhi Sutra*. trans. Harrison, P in *The Surangama Samadhi Sutra*. trans. McRae, J. Berkeley: Numata, 1998, p. 33.
3. The Buddhas can enter nenbutsu samadhi at will. This is one of the main distinguishing features of a buddha. His mind is saturated with the vision of other buddhas. As Zen Master Dogen said, the supreme state is "only buddhas together with buddhas." In this sense, the Buddhist vision is thoroughly metaphysical. The Buddha's function is to be the "Eye of the World" in the sense that he clearly sees all the buddhas of past, future and present. He is lokavid (seer of [all] worlds), this one and the world of buddhas, as well as the worlds of devas, hell beings and so on. Buddhas enjoy the rapture of communing with buddhas.
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