Death: A Zen Buddhist Perspective
by Robert Aiken

Death is treated as a teaching in Zen Buddhism. It reveals and enriches the truths of impermanence, compassion, and interdependency. As a metaphor it reveals the nature of step-by-step practice and of realization.

Zen teachers of the past were commonly able to foresee their own deaths, to prepare for them, and to find a dignified and appropriate way of dying. Daio Kokushi, the de facto founder of Rinzai Zen in Japan, announced the date of his death a year in advance to the day. His grandson in the Dharma, Kanzan Kokushi, made his own dying a ritual:

On the day of his death Kanzan entrusted his affairs to his sole Dharma heir and dressed himself in his traveling clothes. Then he went out from the abbot’s quarters and, standing alone beside the “Wind and Water Pond” at the front gate of the temple, he passed away.

Hung-chih, editor of the Book of Serenity, traveled around saying good-bye:

One day in the autumn of 1157, when he was in his sixty-seventh year, Hung-chih put on his traveling garb and journeyed down the mountain for the first time in nearly thirty years. He visited the commander of the army, the government officials in the district, and the patrons of the temple, thanking them for all their kindness during the years and saying good-bye. On the tenth of November, the master returned to the temple. The following morning, after bathing and changing his robes, he sat down in the formal position and gave a farewell talk to his assembled disciples.

Then he asked his attendant to bring him writing materials. He composed his death poem and passed away with his brush in his hand. There is implicit teaching in all of this, but the old teachers also used death explicitly to guide their disciples and the rest of us. Yueh-shan called out in a loud voice one day, “The Dharma hall is falling down!” The monks rushed to hold up the pillars. He clapped his hands and laughed loudly, saying, “You don’t understand.” He then passed away.

There are many such stories of death used as an upaya, a skillful means of turning the Dharma wheel. Death poems were upaya. Here is Hung-chih’s composition:

Illusory dreams, phantom flowers –
sixty-seven years.
A white bird vanishes in the mist,
autumn waters merge with the sky.
Bassui advises a dying man:

If you think of nothing, wish for nothing, want to understand nothing, cling to nothing, and only ask yourself, “What is the true substance of the Mind of this one who is now suffering?” ending your days like clouds fading in the sky, you will eventually be freed from your painful bondage to endless change.

Bassui is advising his student to persist quietly and calmly with his koan to the end, promising him liberation. But what happens when the white bird vanishes and the clouds fade? We turn to etymology, that wise educator, and find that the word *senge* in Japanese, the term used for a death of a Buddhist master, means “to pass into transformation.” While Bassui and Hung-chih could speak of vanishing or fading, death can also be considered a becoming.

In *The Gateless Barrier*, I quote Yamada Koun Roshi asking a student, “What do you think of death?” The student replied, “Why, it’s like when a bus stops before you – you get on and go.” This student was my wife Anne, who took her name out of the story when she helped to edit the book. Her death many years later, however, made clear how deeply committed she was to the truth of her words.

Anne had suffered a massive heart attack and was breathing heavily. The doctor had come into her hospital room and was questioning me about her living will. Did I agree that there should be no intervention to prolong her life artificially? I agreed that I wanted the process to be natural. I was watching her as I spoke. Her breath became quieter and a look of utmost determination came over her face. She pressed her lips together, her pulse subsided, and she passed away.

It seems that she could hear me speak and that she took my words supportively. The bus had come, so she took the appropriate action. She stepped aboard and sat down with Kanzan, Hung-chih, and so many other ancestors who died showing the rest of us the Way.

I am resolved to learn from Anne’s readiness, which is all, as the duke says in *Measure for Measure*. This is a matter of preparing oneself. Tou-shuai said, “When you are freed from birth and death, you will know where to go. When your elements scatter, where do you go?” This is an ultimate kind of koan. Understanding it involves cutting your bondage to the endless fluctuation – cutting your attachment to the sequence of your movie and finding your home in its particular frames.

In each frame, the metaphor of death offers a handle to the practice. Dogen Kigen Zenji places death among the countless acts of dana (giving) that make up our daily work:

When one learns well, being born and dying are both giving. All productive labor is fundamentally giving. Entrusting flowers to the wind, birds to the season, also must be meritorious acts of giving.

In this passage, Dogen Zenji implies that death (and birth too, in a different way) is more than relinquishment, even more than giving. It is entrusting. When we are practicing – when we are turning the Dharma Wheel – all our acts are those of entrusting. At the Palolo Zen Center we entrust our cat to keep rats from the premises, but we also entrust him to keep birds away. Entrusting makes the world go around. Kanzan entrusted his work to his
sole Dharma heir. On his deathbed, Lin-chi entrusted his Dharma to San-sheng. Along with
the mystery of death comes entrusting one’s work to the world.

This means entrusting to the future, of course. I once asked Yamada Roshi about life after
death, and he replied, “Well, there is always the karmic side.” Indeed, Karma is action.
There is individual karma, social karma, universal karma. The specifics of these karmas go
on and on, impelled from the past, absorbing influences from each other, unfolding into the
future. What would be my specific and what would be yours, going on and on, ever
changing?

I don’t know, and I take my cue from the Buddha’s unwillingness to conjecture about such
things. I don’t even know about my specific in this life very well. Coming to terms with it
is my lifetime task and involves facing perennial questions. “Who am I?” This is the basic
query, and while in so many words it might have worked as a koan for Ramana Maharshi,
it tends to take the rest of us around and around in our cortex. “Who is hearing that
sound?” asked Bassui Tokusho Zenji. That works better for most people, for the self dies in
the process. “What is my task?” is a useful prompt that helps to clarify dying as daily
practice. You forget everything as you greet friends or water the plants. In the nonce of
dying, you forget everything, bequeathing your concerns to family, friends, and all beings.

If you can’t visualize this kind of release, then you have two options: (1) a religion that
promises eternal life or (2) no religion, which can be the condition of despair. Here is Philip
Larkin’s despair in his poem “Aubade”:

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.
Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.
In time the curtain-edges will grow light.
’Til then I see what’s really always there:
Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
Making all thought impossible but how
And where and when I shall myself die.
Arid interrogation: yet the dread
Of dying, and being dead,
Flushes afresh to hold and horrify.

In our heart of hearts, we all know about this horror. Katsuki Sekida, our first resident
teacher at the Diamond Sangha, used to tell us that when he was a child, falling asleep in
the comfort of his bed in his happy home, he would suddenly hear his own voice, crying
out in terrible tones, “You must die!” He would call to his parents and sob in their arms,
able to explain his anguish, his duhkha. As a child he was not asking for help to carry
him through the night but for assurance that the night was not there. As an adult, however,
he and all other worthy students of religion have sought their way right through their
terror, not around it. They shun the teachers who devise ways to avoid terror. As Simone
Weil warned, “Religion, insofar as it is consolation, is a hindrance to true faith.”

The Heart Sutra assures us, “Bodhisattvas live by Prajna Paramita with no hindrance in the
mind; no hindrance, therefore no fear.” The word we translate as “fear” is really “terror” –
Larkin’s terror, little Katsuki’s terror, human terror. The English word “fear” is easier to
chant in that context, but we mustn’t neglect the true meaning. Hakuin Ekaku Zenji asks,
“From dark path to dark path we wander; when shall we be freed from birth and death?”
When shall we be freed from our terror?
Dogen Zenji’s father died when he was two years old, and when he was seven his mother died. He recalled how watching the smoke from the funeral pyre at his mother’s funeral impressed him deeply and sorrowfully with the transience of life. Throughout his career of teaching he linked this awareness of transience with bodhichitta—the desire for realization, the desire for enlightenment, the imperative for realizing the Buddha.

Bodhichitta is what distinguishes Buddhism and Zen from world religions generally. The pilgrim looks directly into the fact of death, into the fact of impermanence, and finds there the solace that others find in the notion of heaven and eternal life. What is that solace? Ha-ha! How truly beautiful everything is!

We find maturity on this path in the death poems of Buddhist teachers and haiku poets, collected in a recent anthology. Here is one of them, by the nineteenth-century poet Bokkei:

Oh, cuckoo,
I too spit blood—
my thoughts.

The cuckoo shows its red mouth when it sings. My thoughts are red like blood, Bokkei is saying. My dying is like the welling up of thoughts, the song of birds—an extraordinary expression of interbeing.

Compare Bokkei’s presentation with the famous haiku by Issa, on the death of his baby daughter:

The dewdrop world
is the dewdrop world,
and yet—and yet.

“It is true that this world is transitory,” Issa is saying. “All beings are ephemeral. I know this, but when I am faced with the death of my baby girl, I look desperately for something to give me hope and comfort.” This is the natural, human way of dealing with anguish, to treat it as an event that was brought forth by implacable exterior circumstances.

Natural—but, Issa, you are not addressing death squarely. There in your grief itself is your emancipation. Your tears are the blood of the universe, coming forth elsewhere in the song of the cuckoo and the darting of geckos. Each breath is truly inspiration and then expiration, life and death. Every day really is a good day.

Yet “anguish is everywhere,” as the Buddha said. The source of that anguish is clinging. What is clinging? What is the object of clinging? It is cherishing the notion of independence from others. Clinging is the heart of my anguish and of human anguish. There is a release from this anguish, however, that Bokkei, for one, found for himself.

This release comes with practice, the Middle, or Eightfold, Path, from Right Views to Right Zazen. Right Zazen is, for example, counting the breaths—facing this point “one,” this point “two,” this point “three.” The point of no magnitude is the marvelous void charged with brilliant light. The circular path leads round again from Right Zazen to Right Views, Right Thought, Right Speech, and the rest, to form our practice in daily life. On this Noble Path we find true human happiness that is far removed from the ordinary conspiracy of
make-believe. It is a matter of finding ourselves temporarily all here together, resolving to take good care of each other--and doing it.

The Eightfold Path does not, however, directly address the grief that one experiences with letting go. My first inkling of the real nature of grief was something my Zen friend R. H. Blyth said to me one day: “I love my sister-in-law much more than I did when she was alive.” I thought to myself, “How strange!”

Then many years later, Anne’s mother died. We flew up to San Francisco for the funeral. She had lived in a large house in the Presidio district of San Francisco, all by herself after her husband died. The close relatives gathered on one side of the living room. The coffin was there on the other side. We stood around enjoying, as the occasion would allow, our reunion with each other. But there was a little too much chatter, so Anne and I went and knelt by the coffin and quietly recited the *Emmei Jikku Kannon Gyo*, the “Ten-Verse Kuan-yin Sutra of Timeless Life.” In those moments I felt her mother’s presence far more intimately and vividly that I ever did when she was alive.

This is, it seems to me, the nature of grief. Beyond tears, beyond self-blame, it is the experience of the person, the presence of the person, and it is very poignant. For me, kneeling by her coffin, it was the pure grace of my mother-in-law.

One hears elderly people who have lost a spouse speak of “my angel husband” or “my saintly wife.” I have tended to dismiss these allusions as sentimental, or even as denial. Now I understand their reality. After thirty-seven years of marriage, I knew Anne’s inadequacies as she knew mine, as any family member knows the dark side of a sibling, parent, or spouse. But when she died, all her shortcomings abruptly vanished into thin air, just as her body vanished. Anne’s shortcomings were her body, the physical barriers of her aspiration, just as my neuroses and foibles get in my own way.

I relate through flawed materials, and so does everyone else. With her death, however, Anne stands forth as the Nirmanakaya, the mysterious and joyous Buddha who is individually unique and pristine as herself. This is her gift, her dana, which she entrusted to me and to her relatives and friends by dying. The bereaved old folks whose words I dismissed as sticky sentiment and denial realized in their own ways a perennial mystery—the gift by death of the rare, singular person—and I know now that they spoke in genuine awe. Thus I take issue with Mark Anthony when he claims that the evil that we do lives after us, while the good often lies interred with our bones. It’s surely the other way around.

Recently one of my middle-aged friends shared with me his unhappiness about his father. His mother had died a year before, and his father had fallen into depression. He then had a stroke and then another stroke. “Of course,” my friend observed unexpectedly, “they loved each other, but they argued a lot.” To quote Issa again, this time with sympathy:

In the dewdrop
of this dewdrop world,
such quarrels!

When my friend linked his father’s strokes to his mother’s death and to the arguments his mother and father used to have, I heard the possibility that his father had at last experienced the true nature of his deceased wife and was consumed with regret that his realization had come too late. He fell into despair, and his decline began. One of my early
Japanese friends, widowed for many years, said sadly to me, “I realize that I thought of my wife as a broom.”

With one’s own human failings, it is probably not possible to summon up full appreciation for the rare Buddha who is one’s spouse or family member or friend. We can, however, practice abiding, patiently and lovingly, with the failings of the other, while acknowledging our own weaknesses and inadequacies.

I am resolved to learn from my bereavement and exercise loving patience more carefully with my other family members, sangha members, and friends – with the clerk at the post office, the cat, the dog, the hibiscus. These, too, I now know much more clearly, are also the Nirmanakaya. Each being is the Tathagata, as the Buddha Shakyamuni said – the living Buddha who comes purely forth, a sister or a brother to protect and nourish.

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