

A Few Thoughts on Confronting the Reality of Death

Rev. Jundo Gregory Gibbs

Remember that This Happens All the Time

Buddhist tradition suggests several models of our condition. The Atman, a soul that is unchanging, undying, uniquely self-same and the locus of one's true identity, is clearly denied in all schools of Buddhism. Since a soul is denied as the explanation for the unity of the self through successive moments, we may consider our situation such that we understand ourselves to die and be reborn many times each day. The body endures from one day to the next but not unchanged. Our subjectivity alters very rapidly from moment to moment. Even so, the vision of dissolving and reappearing every 84,000th of a second that is provided in the early layers of the Buddhist philosophical-analytic writings (Abhidharma) may be too abstract to have real emotional impact.

More concretely one sutra reports Sakyamuni teaching that human life is of about the duration of one breath. We might envision ourselves as returning to the inseparable complex of causes and conditions with each exhalation and emerging again, each as our unique selves, with the next inhalation.

Another thought-experiment a Buddhist could perform is to imagine that when we close our eyes and go to sleep at night our life ends. When we wake up the next morning it's a brand new life. We die each night and are reborn again each morning. We usually fail to appreciate that we have been given a fresh new life when we wake up in the morning. This is one more way of unlocking the impact of the moment to moment nature of our lives. It could also be a clue to understanding why it might be said that with the end of our current biological life there will be a fresh new life for us, perhaps in a better realm.

Any one of these models of thought may help us to appreciate how precious each day of living is. These ways of thinking may also help us to recognize how mysterious the identity we feel persisting from one moment to the next moment truly is. Once Buddhist traditions have led us to recognize the puzzling nature of the self and its deep connections with other beings some of its most traditional thought-experiments may seem less foreign to us. That the identity no one can explain extending from day to day could extend from life to life is not so implausible. It is a thought we have already been thinking, just extended a bit. I'm sure that each of us is convinced that the same person is reading this sentence as the person who began reading the article. How many breaths ago was that I wonder?

When we lose someone we love it is quite natural to hope for he or she to have new lives in better conditions than they lived amidst here. If they had encountered the Nembutsu teaching, or if they simply were good people then, at least, if not always, it may be appropriate to think such thoughts. The reality of what ensues for them from the moment of death is not conceivable to us with the presuppositions we hold. For many centuries the best teachers of Pure Land Buddhist tradition have taught that it would be a mistake to do without such hopes. The truth of the situation is unlocked more than it is obscured by such ideas of life coming after (Gojo).

We Are Part of Something Wonderful

Another time-honored and highly Buddhistic consideration to take up on facing death is the notion that we are intimately a part of something vast. Mahayana Buddhism offers a vision of life as positively interconnected. When respect for all life is encouraged various forms of life can be seen as nurturing us, as providing the concrete possibilities need for us to live. What we see in symbiotic relationships between certain species is, in a deep sense, true of all life, all persons, places, objects and events. That is to say, we can view all things as flowing in and through one another, as interpenetrating, as mutually supporting aspects of an inseparable whole. This deep sort of seeing is volitional. We choose to look at life this wholesome way and it does appear to us as a nurturing universe rather than as a threatening unknown.

We often make the mistake of seeing our lives as small and separate from anything that might be immense, worthy and trustworthy. The Vow of Amida Buddha to liberate all suffering and deluded beings is a renewal process with Life itself that might be seen as a Great Ocean of Light. Death could be viewed as a return to that Vast Ocean of Life from which we will emerge again to engage in new adventures.

For Mahayana Buddhists who embrace the Nembutsu teaching there is often a feeling of being surrounded by a Truth powerful and caring that accepts us just as we are. When we look at this Truth as caring we call it Amida Buddha. When we appreciate the aspect that it surrounds us and supports us at all times we call it the Pure Realm of Amida Buddha's influence (Jo Do). When participate in the practice of saying the Buddha's Name in forms like "Namo Amida Butsu" we refer to it as the calling voice of the Buddha.