

The Heart of Wisdom: Exploring Being with Dying



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I often ask myself: how many people who will die today even know that this will be the last day of their lives? I think of friends who have died without completing projects, without having had the opportunity to say words of goodbye to a spouse or a child, without having forgiven a friend.

I often recall the words of the Mahabharata's Yudhistara:

“The most wondrous thing in the world is that all around us people can be dying and we don't believe it can happen to us.”

In taking care of a dying friend, we may make the mistake of thinking ourselves separate from her experience. In our minds, we may divide ourselves from her: “She is dying; I'm the caregiver.” But in reality, we're joined by the bonds of impermanence. Maybe it's too disturbing to say to yourself: I am dying, too. But the truth is you are already dying. So am I.

We're all linked by the inevitability of loss and death, even if we feel we are walking down the road of living. If we look, we realize that every one of us has had to give up something we loved. We've sacrificed cherished plans or dreams, felt grief and loss equally. Already, all of us have experienced impermanence, which is just another form of dying. What hasn't changed in one way or another? Everything is always changing. Can we see the transient nature of every single being and thing?

If we start training ourselves to observe the changing nature of our everyday situations, we can be on our way to freedom from suffering. What is meant by suffering? It is not just the experience of heavy mental and physical pain. It is also the subtle experience of being out of harmony, out of sorts, not quite happy, a little dissatisfied with what we thought was so great.

Accepting impermanence and our shared mortality requires loosening the story-knot: letting go of our concepts, ideas, and expectations around how we think living and dying ought to be. It also calls us to “practice dying” – that is, to let go, surrender, and give away, in the best of worlds, to practice generosity. For it is generosity that is an expression of letting go, thankfulness, altruism, and kindness, all qualities that can support a sane and gentle death.

We can do this now; at any time, we can start practicing letting go, practicing dying. And if we do, we might also start to perceive the interdependence of suffering and joy – that life and death are not separate but intertwined like roots deep in the earth. During a meditation retreat, one man who suffered from AIDS-related lymphoma experienced a profound insight into the nature of impermanence. Several months later, as active dying unfolded, he was hospitalized. The

tumours pressed against nerves and caused him such terrible pain. When I visited him, he expressed gratitude for having seen that all things do change, because he knew this would include the experience of his pain. In a quiet voice, he told me that if he thought the pain were permanent, he would have gone crazy. He clearly and bravely stated that he knew at the least death would release him from the stabbing pain that could not be managed by drugs. Realizing impermanence, including the truth of his mortality, gave him strength to accept pain and let go of the feelings of desperation that had begun to overcome him.

The awareness of impermanence can serve to deepen our commitment to living a life of value and meaning. Many traditions teach the inevitability of death as the bedrock for the entire spiritual path. Plato told his students, “Practice dying.” The Christian monks of medieval Europe ritually whispered to one another, “Memento mori” – “Remember death.” And one Buddhist sutra tells us: “Of all footprints, that of the elephant is supreme. Of all meditations, that on death is supreme.”

Death in contemporary Western culture, however, is not usually regarded as a teacher with whom to spend time but as a looming biological and even moral failure to be denied and avoided. We do not hold a collective view of death as redemptive or liberating, but see it as an enemy to be beaten or, at best, a bad situation to be endured. The possibility of realization at the moment of death is not part of the story our culture is telling us; so death has little or nothing to offer most of us, and under those circumstances, death is often justifiably feared. When we distance ourselves from death in this unnatural way, it would seem that the only solution to the problem of dying is to avoid it at all costs! And costly it often is – as many of our health-care dollars are spent in the last six months of our lives.

If our culture were to recognize that death and life are inseparable, our approach to both might be quite different. For one thing, we wouldn’t be in denial, suffering collective grief and anxiety over the constant losses and changes we experience in life. Perhaps, from the great spiritual traditions of the past, we can retrieve a vision of dying that makes it possible for us to embrace the unknown without being paralyzed with fear, and to embrace the truth of impermanence as we open our arms to the world. As one old friend said to me: Change is inevitable, growth is optional.

Up until we have received a catastrophic diagnosis or lost someone we love, we might take life for granted. When we receive a diagnosis that we have just a little while to live, or when our closest friend dies, our focus may sharpen, at least for a while, and we begin to examine our lives and our fate. We may choose to make our remaining days into a medical project, or bring our attention to psychological and spiritual issues in the search for meaning, taking care of our relationships, and being of benefit to others. The interesting thing is that some of us will not begin inner work until we are in the heart of suffering. And this may be a little bit too late, for the habits of mind that drive us are deeply rooted and to uproot them in a matter of days, weeks or months might not be so easy, although it is possible. Or, as one Zen teacher told me: Enlightenment is an accident; practice makes you accident-prone.

We can be prone to awakening or inclined toward suffering. This might sound so obvious, but I have always wondered why so many of us do not bother to take care of the mind and heart until

the “last minute”? Why do we move away from opportunities that will mature us? Why not take this precious opportunity now, instead of waiting for a catastrophic diagnosis? What does it take for us to wake up? Sooner or later, as Robert Louis Stevenson noted, “Everybody sits down to a banquet of consequences.”

One important practice to help settle us into an awareness of impermanence is that of generosity. Since we’ll lose all our possessions and connections when we die, why not begin giving away what we have right now? Instead of holding on tightly to all that we think “belongs” to us, we can practice giving away the things we love to others. One close friend gave away much of his fortune and land before he died. He died peacefully at the venerable age of 92, after a morning at the office, again giving away money to others. As he grew older, he felt that every day was an opportunity to lighten his burden, including the burden of his wealth. He liberated huge amounts of money in the course of his lifetime; as he did so, he also seemed to liberate himself. This wonderful elder felt that generosity would establish a pattern in his heart and mind to help him let go of life when the time was ready.

But giving away is not just about lightening one’s financial weight. It is also a practice that nourishes in us the impulse to let go, not cling, and to feel joyful in the experience of letting go, of giving away. This sets down patterns in the heart and mind that can carry us into a peaceful death as we let go of body and mind in the experience of dying.

The realization of the imminence of death can be a direct path to the discovery of meaning in life. For many individuals the worst suffering is meaninglessness. Strangely enough, suffering and dying often can restore meaning and depth to lives that have been bereft. As Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl wrote, death is what gives life meaning. “I always want to be terminal,” one cancer patient told me, close to death. His diagnosis returned to him pieces of his life lost when he was healthy. In dying, he reclaimed un-lived parts of his life that were to benefit not only him but everyone around him as well. He reminded me that we are all terminal.

But death’s door can look very narrow too, and we can be afraid when it opens toward us, particularly when there is nowhere to go except through it. If we believe that we are nothing but this transient body, we can be cast into the valley of fear when the body begins to unbind. If we think we are alone in dying, or we feel lost in grief, our feelings of isolation can cloud and shrink our view. If we perceive the pain we suffer as solid, unchangeable and eternal, our experience can turn hard and claustrophobic.

There are three important gates that can open our view to a bigger horizon, if we find our way to them. Opening the first gate reveals that everything is impermanent, even – especially – living in this human body. The second gate, when it opens, shows us that there is no separate self. And behind the third gate gleams the luminous nature of our own mind.

My friend Rob, diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma, told us that the prospect of death shed light on the shape and tenacity of his ego. In the waves of fear and denial that washed over him, he recognized that the very “self” he was trying to make solid with his story was actually the author of his suffering. Now he could see himself and others as one and the same, coming together and falling apart according to the circumstances of any given moment. Rob began to

practice with the psalmist prayer – “Help me to know the shortness of life, that I may gain wisdom of heart” – and realized he had always been seeking something greater than what he already had – and had suffered accordingly. With death as his new companion, his grasping and attachment withered. He began to let go into what he called “a greater Self, which in turn dissolves into an even greater love for the world.” What he had sought outside himself before, he now discovered within.

He shared with me and others that his insights had resulted in a profound shift of identity, writing: “My identity is not merely the sum total of the many dimensions of my personality. At its most transparent, it is the integration of all I am with all everyone and everything is, and this integrated whole is held by a mystery of Generous Love. As I allow myself to feel the impact of this shift, I realize that I do not die when I die.”

To realize that we suffer because we see ourselves as permanent and separate is so important. Compassion flowers from the realization that we are not separate and have no fixed identity. When we let ourselves love, we no longer resist the suffering of others. The Lama Lodro Dorje reminds us that love is a meltdown. That meltdown establishes a more unified space of brilliance, goodness and sadness. We can no longer protect ourselves from others’ suffering. We experience it simply as suffering – not “mine” or “yours” – just as, if we hurt our left hand, our right hand takes care of it. The right hand and left hand just do what naturally needs to be done, and the space between those hands holds the human heart...

In our culture, with its strong emphasis on personal identity and biography, many of us find it hard to understand what “no-self” means. But we as beings are not separate from one another. We are interconnected, interdependent, and interpenetrate. At our Zen centre, together we chant this food offering before we eat:

Earth, water, fire, air and space combine to make this food.
Numberless beings gave their lives and labour that we may eat.
May we be nourished that we may nourish life.

In that simple meal blessing, I can see earth, water, fire, air, and space. There I see plants, soil, pollinating bees, insects, human labor, and an infinite chain of relationships. We, too, are made up of earth, water, fire, air and space. All of us are interconnected with the sun, moon, wind, and rain, and will someday return to the mother elements. And all of us are also connected in the stream of basic goodness.

If we are able to realize that we aren’t separate from others, that we have no inherent identity, and that nothing is fixed in time and space, our suffering diminishes or even ceases. Yet seeing is believing. We need a direct and personal experience of interconnectedness and impermanence for them to be made true and real in our own lives. Although one friend of mine was dying of ovarian cancer, she was still obsessed with her work as a graphic designer. Hooked up on an IV as well as to her computer, she was finding it very difficult to face the end of her life. One day, at the request of her daughter, a Tibetan doctor came to visit her. He instructed my friend to sit on a mountaintop and look into the sky as an antidote to her habitual fixation on her work and her fear of dying. Later in the week when she had regained a little strength, she asked to be taken to the ski basin high above Santa Fe. She and her daughter sat for an hour in near silence, as they

watched the clouds moving across the late afternoon south-western sky. At her mother's memorial service, her daughter told us that this was the pivotal moment in their relationship. The intimacy that had opened up for them was born in that quiet afternoon in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, and she felt it was that intimacy and spaciousness that had helped her mother die.

Whether we open to the sky or sea or simply sit in stillness and silence, when we move away from the familiar ground of ideas, mental chatter and compulsive work that has seemed to support us, we can discover the space that is our true home, our original dwelling place. Bring yourself to this place where you already are, your original dwelling place. A bigger view is available to you right now, in the unfiltered experience of this very moment – an experience below the rippling of concepts and deeper than language. Just sit down and breathe. Take a moment to stabilize your mind, allowing your natural wisdom to arise. I promise you will see for yourself that nothing, including your own individual identity, exists in the absolute sense in terms of an unchanging, permanent truth. With our view of reality wide and clear, we discover that inexpressibly vast horizon of not-knowing, shining in the dawn of silence and surrender.

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