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3 DEATH: A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE 3  
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"A soldier named Nobushige came to the Hakuin and asked, 'Do Heaven and hell really exist?' 'Who are you?' inquired the master. 'I am a samurai' the warrior replied. 'You, a samurai?' exclaimed Hakuin. 'What kind of ruler would have you as his guard? You have the face of a beggar!' Nobushige became so angry that he reached for his sword, but Hakuin continued, 'So you have a sword! Well, you weapon is still probably much to dull to cut off my head!' As Nobushige drew his sword, Hakuin looked at him and exclaimed, 'THAT is hell!' Sheathing his sword, the samurai bowed with great humility and respect. 'and THIS,' Hakuin announced, 'is heaven.' "

(from Kapleau, 1971, p54)

"A noble man asked Master Hakuin: 'what happens to the enlightened man at death? What happens to the unenlightened man?' The master replied: 'Why ask me?' 'Because you are a Zen master!' 'Yes,' said Hakuin, 'but not a dead one!' "

(from Kapleau, 1971, p60)

The goal of Buddha's teaching is Nibbana (Nirvana). The perpetual cycling of birth, aging, sickness and death is caused by attachment. To develop detachment the Buddha taught about rebirth, kamma (karma), conditionality and encouraged an awareness of death. Buddhists consider that the ego is insubstantial and that only energy moves from moment to moment and lifetime to lifetime. Kamma, or volitional action creates the impulse that impels consciousness to be born into various realms and eventually to death. There are two types of meditation. One centres upon concentration while the other on insight. One can prepare for death by creating wholesome kamma and by being aware of the insubstantiality, impermanence and unsatisfactoriness of conditions. The wise person learns to be aware and surrender to all conditions, death included. One can assist another to have a beneficial death by being honest, trustworthy and restrained with expectations and value judgements, and so be instrumental in

creating a conducive environment on both the physical and emotional levels.

The Buddha began teaching about 2500 years ago. He emphasised awareness and detachment in a present time context. The goal of Buddhist meditation is Nibbana (Nirvana). To help realise this he taught about rebirth, kamma (karma), the conditionality of birth and death and encouraged an awareness of death. The moment of death is said to be a sensitive and important time. To facilitate a beneficial death, conditions should be conducive. The living can skilfully prepare for this moment, as well as assist others to make their last moment a wholesome one.

### The Teachings

Life and death was considered by the Buddha as a cycle that was perpetuated by craving and attachment. The Buddhist conception of this cycle not only relates to the birth and death of entities, but also relates to every moment of a being's life. "Each moment's consciousness is said to be a product of the fading out and re-arising of a previous moment's consciousness. The present mind is thus a unit born from the death of the last moment's mind." (Mullin, 1986, p18).

The Buddha perceived the dissatisfaction of suffering in the continual cycling and realised that if craving did not arise neither would birth, aging, sickness and death. The goal of the Buddhist is to attain Nibbana (or Nirvana) which is supposed to be unconditioned and therefore free from suffering. To do this the Buddha recommended developing mindfulness, morality, concentration, wisdom and non-attachment and so break the links in the cycle of birth and death.

According to Prof Jayatilleke (Nyanaponika and Walshe, 1971), a materialist considers that nothing precedes birth or follows death. The materialists consider themselves rational yet they deny one of the most basic laws of physics, the conservation of energy.

Rebirth to a Buddhist is not considered as the transmigration of a soul or ego; instead it is like a transference of energy. The life and death processes have been compared to the movement of energy through a line of billiard balls. (Ananda Coomaraswamy according to Kapleau, 1971). If the balls are in a line touching one another and one ball strikes one end of the line it will stop still while the last ball will continue its momentum and move in a similar fashion. Similarly in a sine wave, particles of the wave vibrate vertically yet the wave appears to move horizontally. Likewise Buddhists think that no "thing" is transferred from life to life but a momentum or impulse. "Just as, in the present existence, a preceding becomes the condition for a succeeding mental state, so in dependence on the last thought-moment of one life arises the first thought-moment of the next" (Bhiksu Sangharakshita, according to Kapleau, 1971, pp48-49).

Kamma literally means action or deed (Rajavaramuni, 1974). The theory is that every volitional action leaves an impression or habit that will later act as a subconscious predisposition. The actions that one performs create the momentum for the mind states one experiences throughout life. Kamma therefore affects our mind and personality in the present moment as well as the patterns our life may follow. Mullin (1986) says that there are three types of kamma. Negative (unwholesome) kamma that leads to contracted and unhappy mind states. Positive (wholesome) kamma that leads to expansive happy states of mind and meditative kamma (also wholesome) that leads to liberation. Kamma is not a fatalistic concept, because through intention an individual can create (cause) their mode of existence (result). One does not, therefore, get punished or rewarded from an outside force; whatever suffering there is, instead arises from the habits of attachment, aversion and ignorance, as these tendencies lead to the identification with a 'self' and entanglement in the cycle of birth, aging, sickness and death.

Thus a being is considered as a dynamic continuum of body and mind, in which both conscious and unconscious memories affect the present existence. For most, rebirth is an unproven hypothesis. The Buddha taught that one should not accept dogmas blindly. He did say though, that if one developed the ability to remember, one would no longer question the validity of rebirth (Jayatilleke in Nyanaponika and Walshe, 1971).

According to Buddhist cosmology the possibility of rebirth has many options. Every being creates their own reality; however the dimensions of these worlds cross over to form a realm. Accordingly there appears to be 31 levels of existence which can be further divided into six basic categories; the hell realm, the animal realm, the preta or hungry ghost realm, the demon or asura realm, the human realm and the heaven realms (Tambiah, 1970).

The range of heaven to hell can be experienced in our daily human existence. If one is generous, kind and considerate, abides by humanistic principles and develops concentration and wisdom, one reaps the results of these actions and lives with a mind that is happy and at peace. On the other hand if one cheats, lies, murders, steals and lives in an unmindful and immoral fashion, one eventually reaps the result.

Many people are unhappy. Angrily they struggle painfully with existence and are limited by their neurotic fears (hell). Others trap themselves by their stingy possessiveness and unsatiated desires (pretas). Some are just dumb, habitually endeavouring to fulfil their base desires for food and sex (animals), while others (such as some politicians or mega millionaires) are obsessed with power and control (demons). In the human realm most humans live as humans and use a kind of discriminative intelligence in an effort to maximise pleasure and minimise pain. Some people live quite a pleasant existence, they are happy and are willing to share their joy and material possessions with others. They are in heaven. If one is observant one can see how some human beings definitely live in extreme edges, or how at times one's own life seems to be dominated by heavenly or hellish mind states. The realms are a

creation of our minds. On another level however, beings' subjective realities seem to overlap and become a collective objective reality.

Those who have had near death experiences (NDEs) and returned are convinced of the reality that lies beyond our usual physical human dimensions. The NDE-ers have reported being in places that seemed like the classic heaven and hell descriptions, (according to Grey, 1985). According to Buddhist thought, kamma is a law, and at death (like during life) beings can be set off in trajectories that awaken the various accumulations of past negative or positive kamma. The time of physical death is therefore of utmost importance. One could, for example, have created much negative kamma and so seem destined for the realm of woe. However if at the moment of death a human or heaven-like mind state arose they could awaken their human or heaven-like kammic predispositions and so be born in a fortunate realm.

The descriptions of heaven are many and according to the texts (such as Buddhagosa, 1976) they range from the normal Christian type heaven where colours are rich, everything is beautiful and everyone is happy and well-fed, to very refined states of consciousness where one feels a oneness with the universe, or even that they are the creator of the universe. Bhramin or the 'I am' is said to exist in one of these realms.

Though it is preferred to be reborn in a 'heaven' realm the Buddha considered that even the most refined conditioned existence was impermanent and therefore unsatisfactory. The ultimate aim of Buddhist meditation and lifestyle is the unconditioned or Nibbana. Traditionally, if one is a Buddhist meditator there are two basic types of practice one can adopt. One type focuses on developing various levels of concentration upon static objects while the other aims at developing momentary (non-intellectual) insight into the nature of conditions (i.e. their impermanence, insubstantiality and unsatisfactoriness).

The concentration practices (according to Goleman in Tart, 1975) have a wide range of subjects. Some of these include fixing upon mental states such as unconditional loving-kindness (metta), to focusing upon mantras or visions of light. When the mind is developed with concentration it is said to be able to then penetrate into the nature of existence. With the insight method one tries to penetrate right from the beginning, and as one progresses concentration and therefore depth of penetration increases. It seems then that both paths eventually meet and lead to Nibbana. The problem with the concentration method, though, is that refined states of consciousness can be very blissful and develop supernormal powers (such as ESP). In these states, attachment and identification could be easy and so be an impediment on the path.

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Preparing for Death

Negative mind states are painful; positive mind states are pleasant; Nibbana is freedom. "Yesterday is a memory, tomorrow the unknown, now is the knowing" (From a talk at Wat Buddha Dhamma, March 1984, by Ven Sumedho Bhikkhu). Ideally there is nothing to prepare for, only the awareness of and detachment to the present moment. It is very rare, however, to find someone who abides in the present moment detached and at peace. Most people that call themselves practising Buddhists do though endeavour to create conditions that are conducive to the above mind state. Even though Nibbana is the final goal, Buddhists prefer heaven to hell. In traditional Buddhist countries, there is a general awareness that one's present life may condition the next, and the people of, for example, Burma, Thailand or Tibet are renowned for their generosity and kindness. In these countries like anywhere else there are socialised customs, and it is common for people to go and chant at the temples daily. In one of these chants they remind themselves that they are of the nature to die.

Mullin claims that death awareness acts as a counter balance to a person's sexual energy. "Understanding our sexual energy helps us to realise the aggressive, powerful aspects of our nature. Understanding our mortality causes us to realise the passive, humble aspects, balancing our sense of aggression and power" (Mullin, 1983, p4). Elizabeth Kubler-Ross said (according to Mullin, 1983, p6) "We may achieve peace- our own inner peace as well as between nations by accepting the reality of our own death."

Traditionally death awareness has been practised amongst Buddhist monks for at least two thousand years. Some schools, do however, differ in their approach. Tibetan Buddhists consider death awareness useful for many reasons. For some it gives a more panoramic view of their lives, giving calm, and detachment and so not allowing the predisposition for negative kamma to arise. For others it allows a way to develop compassion and wisdom, and so again not develop negative kamma, by being more tolerant of others. Some highly advanced yogis actually practice the art of dying, and become adept with the mind states that may arise during the intermediary state between life and the next rebirth. Death then becomes an opportunity to realise Nibbana and so be free from the cycles of birth and death.

Both the Theravadin (according to Buddhagosa, 1976) and Tibetan schools (Mullin, 1986) claim that without the recollection of death (consciously or unconsciously), one becomes intoxicated with mundane pursuits, one procrastinates, one's meditations become mixed with worldly concerns, one lacks energy to practice, one creates negative kamma and one dies in regret due to surprise. The advantages of death awareness are that one's life becomes purposeful as one investigates the nature of life, insight is developed and death will not be a surprise and so at the time of death negative mind states would be less likely to arise.

Both schools recommend reflecting upon the nature of death. Some of these reflection are as follows; death is inevitable; no being, whether famous, wealthy or enlightened escapes death, no worldly success can transcend death, life is fragile and dependent

upon many conditions and the time of death is unpredictable.

The way a dying person actually faces the moment of death is, of course, dependent upon their habitual responses to life (kamma). Some people would therefore have an easy death while others struggle. According to many texts (such as Fremantle and Trungpa, 1976), when a human dies they enter into an intermediary state between death and rebirth (also called the Bardo). Beings in this state (Vasubandhu in Kapleau, 1971) have abilities (such as ESP and travelling at great speeds), that are way beyond their previous, if human, existence. These beings also have intellect, emotion and will. This state still has momentary births and deaths, as well as a finite time span. The Tibetans claim it can last up to 49 days, however one can not be sure. (about its reality or time span.)

Kamma is transmitted to this intermediate being at the moment of physical death, the process being compared to a seal in muddy ground. The Bardo being is then drawn up by the force of its past accumulations or kamma to be born into whatever state is most resonate with its particular energy. Some highly advanced yogis, such as some Tibetan lamas, create the intention to be born as humans and while in their present incarnation predict to whom, where and when their next incarnation will be.

It would be nice to be able to control our destinies in such a way, however to most people death, like life, is a time of uncontrollability and uncertainty. During life people are often confronted with disappointment as life doesn't always turn out as expected or the way 'it should be'. Albert Ellis, a cognitive therapist, claims that much of human suffering comes from 'irrational beliefs' (Davison and Neale, 1982). 'One should be healthy', 'one should be successful' or even 'one should always be in love or be loved'. Occasionally expectations are fulfilled. However when they change (and they always do), expectation conditions disappointment and there is a tendency to cling and feel sorrow.

During life there are many moments of beauty, joy, love and happiness. However, if there is identification and attachment to these states they eventually condition their opposites. It seems then that a wise person therefore realises that when heaven like body states change according to their nature, resistance only conditions hell, and surrender is the best policy. So at death as with life he/she is at peace with conditions.

Humans can prepare for death by developing all sorts of reassuring religious beliefs or by developing high levels of concentration and so increase their chances of a heaven rebirth. If, on the other hand, one practices insight, life is just a constant process of surrender to the impermanence of conditions and 'death' is just another condition.

For the insight meditator detachment does not mean separation or disassociation from conditions and surrender does not mean apathetic passivity. Instead collectively they mean being honest, open, aware and allowing the processes of nature to occur

unobstructed by views, concepts and desire. In a talk by a Buddhist monk, (Sumedho, 1983) it was said that the Buddha's teachings could be summarised into two words: 'letting go'. Clinging is a cause of suffering, so at death, like any other time, surrender is the best alternative.

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Assisting others through death and beyond.

The law of kamma states that beings make their own kamma and no-one even a Buddha or 'God' can change it for them. It is possible, however, to choose company or situations that are conducive to wholesome states of mind. During life, understanding friends can help us feel happy and clarify our confusion. Beings create their own realities; however, it seems that other people can greatly affect how another may perceive that reality. Some people are fixed, rigid and destined to follow their habitual tendencies, while others are open and willing to listen and reach beyond their ego conditioning.

At the time of death a skilful death friend could act as a suitable catalyst to awaken wholesome tendencies and insight into the nature of life and death. A person has the right to live and die as they wish. It would be a hypocritical value judgement to tell a dying person that they 'should be' happy, peaceful, accepting, detached and so on. Kalish (1985) commented that a fulfilling death for some is to die in a rage. It seems then that the duty of a death assistant is firstly to be honest as honesty cultivates honesty, and secondly to be accepting as acceptance sets the emotional tone for 'letting go'.

A death assistant could be instrumental in protecting a dying persons rights from assumptions of others. Dr Evan Wentz once wrote (according to Mullin, 1983, p21) "just as the birth process can be aborted by malpractice so can the death process." In many hospitals it is often an automatic response to administer pain-killing drugs. The decision to reject mind-bending opiates could be facilitated and so allow the dying person to die in a state of mental clarity.

Those that know that they are about to die are probably more fortunate than those who die unexpectedly or suddenly. Traditionally in Buddhist countries, when a person is about to die the teachers and monks are invited to assist. The Tibetans claim that in the Bardo state, consciousness can be contacted and so have a text written to assist those who are dying, die and then guide them through the delicate territory of the intermediary state to either fortuitous rebirths or enlightenment. In the bardo one is said to be confronted with peaceful and wrathful deities, which are in fact only aspects of one's own mind. Trungpa (1976) says that "The Tibetan Book of the Dead" is more like a 'Book of Life' as it serves as a reminder of how a being (living or in the bardo) has lived their life and so encourages them not to be shaken by degenerative temptations or unnecessary fear.

The book could have limited application to those unaccustomed to its cultural language. On a practical level Trungpa recommends that while helping a person to die, a friend should be honest and trustworthy and remind the person that what may occur is only the nature or/and projection of their own minds. "When you die you will have all sorts of traumatic experiences, of leaving your body, as well as your old memories coming back to you as hallucinations. Whatever the visions and hallucinations may be, just relate to what is happening rather than trying to run away. Keep there, just relate to that." (Fremantle and Trungpa, 1976, p28).

The moment of death can be aborted so an assistant should be sensitive to all conditions. Tibetan monks usually ask grieving relatives to leave the death bed as the grief could condition sadness in the dying person. In other situations, however, the presence of the dying person's family could be a condition for the arising of unconditional love and acceptance, or the opportunity to complete 'unfinished business' and so feel free to die with an attitude of peace and detachment.

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For the living, death is the unknown (or at least the unremembered). A death assistant can pretend to know about death and how to die; however this knowledge is only based on assumption. We can only know about death by knowing life. The law of kamma is a law proven with investigation into our present day to day existence. Rebirth, though to most not a verified hypothesis, seems a possibility again only validated with personal experience. Attachment is the cause of suffering. If one is detached to life, death is no more or less important than having a cup of tea. Though one can help another die, it is of utmost importance that an ignorant assistant does not force his or her value judgements upon one who is at a very sensitive transition time in their existence. An assistant can, though, endeavour to create the environment, both physical and emotional whereby dying people, (and for that matter all sentient beings) are at peace with whatever conditions that may arise and pass away-die.

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