

On Impermanence and Death

Preface

I have been a practicing Buddhist monk since 1988, when I took my vows at the first Nichiren sect temple built in the United States. I had studied broadly for many years in science and in philosophy and religion without satisfaction until I arrived at the teachings of Buddha. It was not immediately apparent that these teachings, like all other transferred “knowledge”, had been appropriated into varied traditions and belief systems in every country and community it traveled. The book, “Buddhist Sutras”, ISBN: 4-333-01028-4, presents the circumstances of the heroic and amazing efforts to spread these teachings all over the Asian continent over hundreds of years following 500-700 BCE. It became my personal mission to seek the most scholarly translations and clarifications of the most original and unadulterated teachings of Shakyamuni, the embodiment of the Buddha life-condition. This resulted in my own writings and my own eschewing of many fallacies and extraneous rituals that had no basis on the core of the teachings. This, over 25 years, became Quantum Life Buddhism. Direct links to strong clarifications of scholars like Nagarjuna, Vasubandu, and Tien-Tai (Chi-hi) over the first one thousand years of the Common Era are not only inspiring, but also invaluable and essential. These scholars never attempted to re-write or re-interpret the teachings. Rather, through the logic and clarity of the original teachings, these men were able to demonstrate the erroneous views and added on conventions that did not belong or equate to the straightforward original; teachings.

Having said all this, I must also state that there are two types of monks in Buddhism. There is the monastic monk who leaves society for complete dedication to practice and study in a highly structured and closed environment to attain enlightenment and to preserve the purity of the teachings. The second is no less dedicated to those same goals, but endeavors to do so while remaining in the turbulence of the public environment. The second type has the Japanese moniker of “Nyudo”, or Monk amongst the people. This would be my path.

In the past year, Sandra, my partner of over 7 years has been dealing with much death in her family. I at 57 years of age, Sandra at 60, we are both becoming familiar with the health of body and mind leading to the end of our lifetimes. Sandra’s mother, Martha, lives in an old modest house in a small town. Martha’s mother, Alma, 95, also lives with her and requires constant assistance. About four years ago, Linda Sue, Sandra’s sister, moved in with Martha. Linda Sue’s health has suffered over the years and this last year she finally succumbed to a doctor visit to discover that she was in the late stages of aggressive lung cancer. Her health quickly degraded over the next month and only weeks later passed-away in Martha’s home in great pain while

Sandra and Martha watched and attended her as well as Alma, in the same home. Tremendously stressful as this situation became, Linda Sue's decision to do this at home and her lack of readiness for this event, left many earthly affairs undecided and then left to Sandra and Martha to resolve, while also dealing with the obvious bereavement and grief of this time.

Now, several months have passed and it was with complete understanding that Martha asked Sandra and me what our funereal expectations and desires are as practicing Buddhists. As we live in the "Bible-belt" of the United States, Mississippi, I felt great honor and responsibility to answer this question with respect for Martha and for Sandra and me. To answer the question, I felt it mindful to explain in the simplest terms, the perspective of Buddhists on life and death, as this would provide a meaningful context for the ceremonies for the death experience. What follows is my respectful explanation of Buddhist perspectives on death and the funereal observances. After writing this, I felt it might also be of some use to more people, who may have often wondered but not asked or even know where to find such information. I myself found this information to be difficult to find and often wrong.

The first issue I had to address was the huge misunderstanding and often propagated idea of Buddhist re-incarnation. This is not Buddhist. Hindu practices in India are full of re-incarnation myths and these have often been tacked onto Buddhist teachings without validation. One of the primary tenants of Buddhist teachings is the concept of "Anatman", which translates as "Nonesuch Soul", or more accurately that there is no such a thing as an everlasting or transient vessel or entity called by any name including the "soul". This becomes obvious as one studies the fundamental teaching of impermanence in Buddhism. Both modern science and 2500-year-old Buddhist teachings demonstrate conclusively that nothing in the physical universe exists in a state of stasis. All matter, all time, all space, and everything within it, has a finite life span. More to the point perhaps, the affects and effects of any actions made by anything will also diminish and be integrated into the whole over time. The idea that there is a permanent repository of actions and traits like a box called "Bob or Alice", that re-manifests in different forms, is complete fantasy and has no place in Buddhism. I hope that the following explanation provides some clarity on this matter as it is essential to the understanding of the dignity and singular value of a human life and of all life. The reverence that Buddhist teachings place on life in general and specifically on the human lifespan is unsurpassed and underappreciated.

Beyond death

The human experience, whether you believe it to be only 6000 years old or Millions of years of evolution, Western, Eastern, Asian, African, North, or South, has always included a fascination with death. After all, no human has returned from death to discuss it. Because of this always-present mystery, humans throughout history have attempted to adopt beliefs and rituals to help them to deal with the anxieties and fears associated with the final and always looming experience of death. Given the immensity of our surroundings on this Earth as well as the skies and stars, it would seem justified to assume that death could be a portal, or a doorway through which we enter another “reality”. Of course, as human beings have become more social and settled into communities, certain individuals and groups began investigating and amassing great volumes of discovered “truths”. These truths became truth, because they were observable, repeatable, and constant. This later became known as the scientific method. If something in nature was to be “known”, it was first questioned or tested, and results were then recorded to attest to the veracity or fallacy of the assumptions about it.

In the case of death, the science of Buddhist thought was applied, in a very straightforward and observable way. It was observed that all things in nature are finite. This is an observable truth for vegetables, as well as stars. The human lifespan is simply another of those things in nature that has a beginning, a middle, and eventually, an end. What contains all this nature is also a natural process, the process of Life. Life contains all things in their impermanence. Life is a process that is observable in all things, and in their impermanence. The process of Life also includes the Universe entirely. In this way, Death is not the opposite of Life, but actually, Death is the opposite of Birth.

Therefore, in Buddhist thought, Death is simply a part of the larger process of Life, and not an end at all. Birth and Death are a period of time when Life creates a window for change. It is each human “life’s” opportunity to affect all of the Life process, through this window of birth and death. To a Buddhist, a life well lived is one of awareness of one’s own actions to be life affirming, with respect to one’s self as well as to others, and observing of the actions of others in the same regard. Since all of us affect all of Life, it is also true that we are affected by the actions of others, just as we affect those around us. Together, all of humanity is contained in the larger process of Life, and affects the immense process of Life in much the same way as pouring a cup of tea into the ocean affects the ocean. Each human life is like a cup of tea, and a Country of people is like a large pot of tea. It may take millions and Billions of cups of tea in order to perceive a change in the Oceans, but it is surely happening in time.

In life, humans quickly attach their identity to the physical realities surrounding them. A complex mixture of desires and needs are created to maintain this egotistical identity. From the clothes we wear to the foods we eat and the language we use, all play a role in our perception

of our self, as well as the way we see ourselves in the world around us. These same attachments become the source of many emotional yearnings and suffering to the degree that we can maintain them. Intellectually, we know that these things are not who we are, but simply an image or attitude we portray. Our true inner self has no need of such devices or disguises. In death, we have the opportunity to rid ourselves of all these temporary, impermanent attachments, and then liberated to re-enter the flow of Life without encumbrance. In Buddhist terms, this liberation is called Nirvana. To be aware of this goal in our lifetime is sometimes called enlightenment.

The first attachment made in human life is to our body. In death, we leave our body behind. This is why in Buddhist funeral ceremony or ritual, the human body is often cremated. In cremation, the body is returned to its fundamental physical elements, no longer identified with a specific time-span of human life. In this way, we are freed from the attachment to a physical and impermanent thing. All the actions of our lifetime are then liberated to affect all of life in the human world as well as in the Life process itself.

This is also observable in our own lives when someone we love or know has died before us. Their “memory” lives on in each of us. Moreover, that memory is unique to each of us. It can be said that this is the “real” identity of the person that has passed through this life in its affect to all those touched by it.

Rituals in Quantum Life Buddhist Practice can vary in accord with the life-condition of those for whom the ceremonies are designed. What follows are the fundamentals of each stage of reverence in the funeral process of an individual.

[The First Stage](#)

To fully appreciate the timespan of a human life and its affect to all others, a prayer (Gongyo) and Daimoku (Na-Mu-Myo-Ho-Ren-Ge-Kyo) are offered before the cremation. If the deceased is a practicing Nichiren sect Buddhist (Quantum Life Buddhist), the body will have that person’s Gohonzon on his/her person. In addition, a new Buddhist name is given to the deceased to also release them from their earthly attachments and to begin a new existence integrated with all of Life.

[The Second Stage](#)

Once cremated (with Gohonzon), the ashes are presented (in some container) to a Buddhist altar and kept beneath the Butsudan (house of Gohonzon) for prayer (Gongyo) for a period not less than 49 days.

Typically, during the recitation of the Fifth Meditation (prayer) at the end of the third section, and prior to the prayer, Daimoku (Nam-Myo-Ho-Ren-Ge-Kyo) will be offered by all those in attendance while a procession of those who wish can approach the altar and offer an incense to the Butsudan in honor of the deceased. When all offerings are completed, the final meditation (prayer) is offered and Gongyo is ended. During this period, all family and friends of the deceased are urged to offer Daimoku to the complete integration of the life affirming actions of the deceased to achieve a peaceful restful state of complete awareness.

Any remaining actions, not life affirming, will create dissonance in the greater Life process resulting in future manifestations of new human life for the opportunity of enlightenment and expiating those non-life affirming actions. This is NOT rebirth. It is the process of life. It is like a wave reaching the shore from a great ocean. The wave is the result of many other influences from the Moon's gravitational changes, the winds, and currents moving well offshore, and the temperatures and tectonics of the waters and planet. We call this process "tidal", and we have no problem understanding that each wave is its own entity. Although each wave may seem very similar, in fact, we know that each wave is formed independently, and then dissipates into the whole of the ocean. The process of Life is also like this.

[The Third Stage](#)

An annual memorial can be performed for an individual or a family or group with a small tablet or card inscribed with that person's name or Buddhist name if applicable. This card is called a Toba. The Toba or collections of Toba are placed beneath the Butsudan of the Buddhist altar and Gongyo is recited as well as Daimoku in memorial of the deceased. Incense is offered by each individual in a procession while Daimoku is chanted by the others in attendance as described in the second stage.

For more on the Toba ceremony and other conventions and practices of Quantum Life Buddhism and Nichiren Sect Buddhism in general, please refer to the "Big Book of Buddhism", ISBN: 978-0-557-52315-3