

The Buddhist View of Life and Death

I. Non-dualistic view of life and death.

- a. Life and death are two sides of the same coin.
- b. "Life-Death", not "Life and Death".
- c. I began to die the moment I was born.

II. Shakyamuni Buddha's view of life and death.

- a. Loss of mother.
- b. Four Gates – seeing death shook him up, leading to his renunciation.
- c. Story of man shot by poisoned arrow.
- d. Emphasis on this life.

III. Zen View

- a. There is only "this life."
- b. Must see beyond life and death and nirvana.

IV. Tibetan View

- a. Belief in reincarnation literally.
- b. Dalai Lama is incarnate of previous lama.
- c. How to interpret "former lives".
- d. Problem of "no soul" doctrine of Buddhism and reincarnation.

V. Pure Land Buddhist View

- a. "Popular" Pure Land belief - rely on Buddha to be born in Pure Land.
- b. Deeper level of understanding – Pure Land is nirvana, not a place.
 1. Saichi's poem on "eyes" are borderline of seeing Hell or Pure Land.
 2. Pure Land "here and now", not after death.

VI. Understanding, awakening to one's death is to awaken to life.

- a. Impermanence means living fresh, creative life everyday.
- b. Japanese expression, "Ichigo-Ichie" (Once in a lifetime).
 1. Red Skelton
 2. Masao Hanada

VII. Rennyō Shōnin's Letter on the White Ashes

- a. Letter of condolence to follower, Minbu Aoki, who lost 17 year old daughter.

VIII. Where do we go when we die?

- a. Ocean and Wave example
- b. "Transcending" life and death. Saichi's poems as an example.

IX. "Coffinman", the journal of a Buddhist mortician, by Shinmon Aoki.

Saichi's Poems

(From D. T. Suzuki's book, Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist)

I, bound for death
Am now made into the immortal 'Namu-amida-butsu'.
p. 159

Life's ending means not-dying;
Not-dying is life's ending.
Life's ending is to become 'Namu-amida-butsu'.
p. 159

Death has been snatched away from me.
And in its place the 'Namu-amida-butsu'.
p. 159

Saichi's heart destined for death when his end comes,
Is now made an immortal heart,
Is made into the 'Namu-amida-butsu'.
p. 160

To die – nothing is better than death;
One feels so relieved!
Nothing exceeds this feeling of relief.
'Namu-amida-butsu, Namu-amida-butsu!'
p. 160

I'm fortunate indeed!
Not dead I go,
Just as I live,
I go to the Pure Land!
'Namu-amida-butsu!'
p. 165

Led by 'Namu-amida-butsu',
While living in this world,
I go to 'Namu-amida-butsu'.
p. 165

How grateful!
While others die,
I do not die:
Not dying, I go
To Amida's Pure Land.
p. 167

"On the White Ashes"

From the Gobunsho, Letters of Rennyō Shōnin

Translated by Taitetsu Unno

In silently contemplating the transient nature of human existence, nothing is more fragile and fleeting in this world than the life of man. Thus, we have not heard of human life lasting for ten thousand years. Life swiftly passes, and who among men can maintain his form for even a hundred years? Whether I go before others, or others go before me; whether it be today, or whether it be tomorrow; who is to know? Those who leave before us are as countless and as fragile as the drops of dew. Though in the morning we may have radiant health, in the evening we may be white ashes. When the winds of impermanence blow, our eyes are closed forever; and when the last breath leaves us, our face loses its color. Though loved ones gather and lament, everything is of no avail. The body is then sent into an open field and vanishes from this world with the smoke of cremation, leaving only the white ashes.

There is nothing more real than this truth of life. The fragile nature of human existence underlies both the young and the old, and therefore, we must -- one and all -- turn to the Teaching of the Buddha and awaken to the ultimate source of life.

By so understanding the meaning of death, we shall come to fully appreciate the meaning of this life which is unrepeatable and thus to be treasured above all else.

By virtue of True Compassion, let us realize the unexcelled value of our human existence; and let us live with the Nembutsu, *Namu Amida Butsu*, in our hearts.

Do not stand at my grave and
weep;

I am not there. I do not sleep.

I am a thousand winds that
blow.

I am the diamond glints on
snow.

I am the sunlight on ripened
grain.

I am the gentle autumn's rain.

When you awaken in the
morning's hush,

I am the swift uplifting rush
of quiet birds in circled flight.

I am the soft stars that shine
at night.

Do not stand at my grave and
cry;

I am not there. I did not die.

Unknown

"Gambatte!" Visitors come and say "Gambatte!" And in between nurses sometimes check in on you to say "Gambatte!"

I went to a symposium on terminal cancer patients, and about the only thing I remember was a statement made by Professor H from one of the national cancer centers. While attending an end stage patient, he noticed that every time someone said "Gambatte!" she would wince, and so once, after he had given her an injection to kill the pain, he told her, "I'll be following you on your journey," and that was the first time he saw her smile. After that he said that her outlook changed.

Doctors like these are few and far between, and so if you ever find yourself in intensive care, the upside is no visitors are allowed so you'll never hear anyone say "Gambatte!" The downside is you'll be surrounded by countless plastic tubes and cords connected to all sorts of instruments and monitors. When you accept the fact that your time has come and you start to drift toward the world of Light, the monitoring instruments at the nurse center will detect the change and set off an alarm. This will be followed by the hurried footsteps of nurses and doctors coming in your direction to shoot you up with injections and slap your face silly.

At any rate, it's as if someone were to come along and, without asking, suddenly change the channel of the television program you were watching. With the idea that life comes first, they place utmost importance on "saving life." Intruding upon a dimension rightfully ours, modern medicine robs us

of the dignity of what people in the past regarded as most precious: that final moment of death.

In these circumstances there is no way we can die a beautiful death.

This morning, when I awoke, the snow was falling. It must have been snowing through the night. More than eight inches of snow had piled up in just one night. To anyone who ever grew up in snow country, this should come as no surprise. But whenever this snow-white world emerges suddenly before one's eyes, there's always a fresh sense of wonder.

Beyond the garden, camellias were blooming at the foot of the hedge. They'd been blooming there before, but I hadn't noticed them. It took this fresh background of fallen snow for their red petals to stand out. *Whoa!* I thought to myself, as I averted my eyes from the red petals, the piercing spectacle of the pure white landscape intruding.

I was just enjoying a quiet holiday for once when the telephone rang, disturbing my reverie. It was one of my relatives asking me to make a hospital call to that uncle of mine who was now hospitalized with cancer. It was years since we last met, the last time being when he broke off relations with me. I caught myself thinking something like, "Serves him right after what he did to me!" I still burned with indignity from that time. He called me a disgrace to the family; he made me crawl like a worm — that I could never forget.

PROM, "COFFINMAN", BY
SIMPSON ADKI.

Who do they think they are, anyway, telling me I should call on my uncle at the hospital! As I was clearing the snow from the car and shoveling the drifts of snow away from the house, I got another phone call. This time it was my mother. My mother had just gotten back from the hospital and was calling me right away.

"Can't you do it just this time . . ."

"Hell, no. He's the one who told me not to show my face around here!"

"Well, you know your uncle looked after you when you were little . . . And you know today when I went to call on him he could barely tell who I was. He's so bad off, it'll probably be tonight or tomorrow . . ."

As I listened to my mother's entreaties over the phone, I had a change of heart. If my uncle was in such critical condition that he could barely recognize my mother, it didn't matter whether he had lectured me or not. Besides, my auntie was always so good to me, and I bore her no grudge. I felt I'd better go to see him.

"All right, all right, I'm going, I'm going."

I put the receiver down and left for the hospital right away, not even telling my wife.

I was rather tense when I knocked at the door of the private room, from behind which my aunt peered out.

"Ah, you've come at a good time," she said, welcoming me in a big voice, explaining that he had been under but had just

regained consciousness a little while ago.

Though I was a little concerned that I was making a bad entrance, my auntie took me by the hand and led me to the bedside. I could see that my uncle was definitely in a half-dazed condition. But he seemed to know who I was, and with both hands shaking he extended them upward to me. As I grasped his hands, I sat down on the chair my auntie had brought.

My uncle was looking in my direction and was trying to say something. His face was completely different from the face he made when lecturing me. It was a soft and gentle face. From the corner of his eyes a tear glistened. When I felt him grip my hands ever more slightly, I thought I heard him say "Arigato," thank you. Then later again, still grasping my hands, he repeated in a voice barely audible, "Arigato." That face of his was so soft and gentle, it virtually glowed.

The next morning my uncle died. The resentment in my heart was gone. The only thing I felt building up was a sense of shame. At the funeral, as I offered incense, I said, "Uncle, I am so sorry. Please forgive me." The tears were rolling down my cheeks in a steady stream.

It was a few days after my uncle's funeral. A package arrived in the mail; I hardly ever receive packages. The person who sent it was someone once close to me. When I opened the package a small book fell out. It was called *Thank You, Everyone!* It con-

tains the last thoughts of a doctor named Kazukiyo Imura, who died at the young age of thirty-two.

I started flipping through the pages casually, but before I knew it I was reading it intently, sitting with back straight and legs tucked under me. Then, as I was reading it, it became impossible to go on, the tears were pouring out so fast I couldn't see the page.

When I was told the cancer had metastasized to the lungs, I was prepared for it, but still the news sent a bit of a chill down my spine. After all, the cancer cells that had spread were in more than just one or two places.

When I came out of the x-ray room, I promised myself that as long as I could walk, I would walk.

On the evening of that day, as I was parking the car at the apartment, I saw a mysterious aura. Everything around me was extremely bright. The people going to the supermarket to shop appeared to be shining. The kids who were running around appeared to be shining. The dogs, the drooping heads of rice, the weeds, the telephone poles, even down to the tiny pebbles, all appeared to be shining. When I got back to the apartment, even my wife appeared to be shining, so much so that I wanted to put my hands together in reverence.

As I read this passage, I recalled my uncle's face. And I felt I had a glimpse from the inside why my uncle's face was

so soft and pure. My uncle at that time must have seen my auntie, the hospital window, the flower vase, the nurse as if they were shining. That's why he had such a radiant and gentle countenance.

And then that word he whispered in a tiny voice, "Arigato," is repeated over and over again on the final pages of Dr. Imura's diary:

Everyone, I thank you so very much. *Arigato.*

The Hokuriku winter is serene. But having endured the long winter, the buds sprout after the snow melts, to proclaim the arrival of the tulip season.

Thank you, everyone. *Arigato.*

How wonderful you people are! Even as I was being battered by the waves that came one after another, you made sure that I was floating happily so that I would arrive at my final destination. How happy this has made me!

Thank you, everyone!

Thank you, everyone, thank you so very much. *Arigato.*

Day after day all I see are dead people. And so the dead appear to me as serene, even beautiful. By contrast, the despicableness of the living began to irk me — the living, who, out of their fear of death, peer into the faces of the dead with fear and trepidation in their eyes. As they watch me washing the deceased, I can sense their lines of sight mixed with feelings of alarm, fear,

The journal of a Buddhist mortician

Shinmon Aoki

COFFINMAN



with a foreword by Taitetsu Unno author of
River of Fire, River of Water