

# LIFE IS UNCERTAIN; DEATH IS CERTAIN

By B.R. De Silva

DEATH, according to the conventional usage of the term, is the separation of an individual from this world causing lamentation and grief to those left behind. Although it is natural to feel and even express our sorrow at the loss of those near and dear to us, such an attitude is contrary to Buddhist tenets, because sorrow is a mental factor associated with an AKUSALA or an unwholesome thought; this unwholesome thought is rooted in *DOSA* or ill-will. Thoughts of sorrow defile the mind and rob the mind of its pristine purity.

The Noble Aryan One who have attained the stages of *Anagami and Arahants* do not weep and cannot weep at the passing away of those dear to them as they have completely eradicated *dosa* or ill-will. Ven. Anuruddha, who was then an Arahant, did not weep at the passing away of the Buddha. But Ven. Ananda, who was at that time only a *Sovan* or a learner, could not but express his deep sorrow. The weeping bhikkhu had to be reminded of the Buddha's view on situations of this nature.

“Has not the Buddha told us, Ananda, that what is born, what comes to being, and what is put together, is subject to dissolution? That is the nature of all conditioned formations to arise and pass away – Having once arisen they must pass away – And when such formations cease completely, then comes the Peace Supreme”. These lines describe the foundation on which the structure of Buddhist philosophy is built.

What is the cause for our grief and sorrow? Attachment (*Tanha*) in all its forms. If we want to transcend sorrow, we have to give up attachment – attachment not only to persons but also to possessions. This is the truth; this is the lesson that death should teach us. Unless we learn this lesson, death can strike us and fill us with terror. This fact is beautifully illustrated by an apt simile found in the Dhammapada: “Death will take away the man who is unduly attached to his children and his possessions, just as a great flood takes away a sleeping village”.

This Gatha suggests that if the village had not been asleep but awake and alert, the havoc created by the flood could have been appreciably reduced.

Let us now examine how Buddha solved this problem for two persons who, through attachment, were both deeply grieved by death. One person was Kisagotami. Kisagotami's only child was dead after he was stung by a serpent. So she went to the Buddha to ask for a remedy. She carried the dead child in

her arms. Buddha asked her to bring a few mustard seeds from a house where no one has died. But such a house she could not find. Every house was either in mourning or had mourned over a death at one time or other. Then she realised the bitter truth: death was universal. Death strikes all and spares none. Sorrow is the heritage of everyone born.

The other person whom the Buddha advised was Patacara. Patacara's case was sadder. Within a short period she lost her two children, husband, brother, parents and all her possessions. Losing her senses, she ran naked and wild in the streets until she met the Buddha. The Buddha brought her back to sanity by explaining that sorrow is inherent in all Samsaric existence.

“You have suffered from similar situations, not once, Patacara, but so many times before. For a long time you have suffered the deaths of fathers and mothers, sons and brothers. While you were thus suffering, you indeed shed more tears than there is water in the four oceans”.

At the end of the talk, Patacara realised the suffering that is life. Both Patacara and Kisagotami comprehended *dukkha* which each learned through tragic experience. By deeply understanding the First Noble Truth (*dukkha*), the other three Noble Truths were also understood. “Who so monks, comprehends *dukkha*” says the Buddha in Samyutta Nikaya, also comprehends the arising of *dukkha*, the cessation of *dukkha*, and the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha*”.

Death, as defined in Buddhist texts, is the dissolution of *khandas* are the five aggregates of perception, sensation, mental formations, consciousness and corporeality or matter. The first four are mental aggregates or *nama*, forming the unit of consciousness. The fifth, *rupa* is the material or physical aggregate. This psycho-physical combination we conventionally name an individual, person or ego. Therefore what exists are not individuals as such, but the two primary constituents, *nama* and *rupa*; bare phenomena. We do not see the five aggregates as phenomena but as an entity because of our deluded minds, because of our innate desire to treat these as a self in order to pander to our self-importance.

We will be able to see things as they truly are if we only have patience and the desire to do so. If we would turn inwards to the recesses of our own minds and note with just that bare attention (with *sati*), note objectively without projecting an ego into the process, and then cultivate this practice for a sufficient length of time, as laid down by the Buddha in the *Sati Pattana Sutta*, then we will see these five aggregates not as an entity but as a series of physical and mental processes. Then we will not mistake the superficial for the real. We will then see that these aggregates arise and disappear in rapid succession, never being the same for two consecutive moments, never static but always in a state of flux, never BEING but always BECOMING.

The period of duration of these mental aggregates is very short, so much so that during one flash of lightning, over thousands of such successive appearances or thought-units or thought-moments, flash within our mind. The material or physical aggregates, however abide a little longer 17 times the duration of the above-mentioned thought-moments. Thus during every moment of our lives, formations arise and dissolve. This momentary dissolution is one form of death, according to Buddhist philosophy. This is called *Kanika Marana*.

This momentary dissolution of elements is not apparent, because successive aggregates arise immediately to take the place of those that have dissolved, and they in turn arise and disappear as others have done before, as we say – Life goes on.

But with the passage of time, however, the material or the physical aggregates lose their strength, and decay sets in. A day will come when these aggregates cannot function anymore. According to conventional speech, this is the end of one existence. Then we say “Death has occurred”.

But the four mental aggregates, viz: consciousness and the three other groups of mental factors forming *Nama* or the unit of consciousness, go on uninterruptedly arising and disappearing as before, but not in the same setting, have to because that setting is no more. They have to find immediately a fresh physical base as it were, with which to function – a fresh material layer appropriate and suitable for all the aggregates to function in harmony. The Kammic law of affinity does this work, and immediately a resetting of the aggregates, takes place and we call this REBIRTH.

BUT it must be understood that there is no transmigration of a soul or any substance from one body to another. According to Buddhist philosophy what really happens, is that the last *Javana* or active thought process of the dying man, releases certain forces or energies. The quality of these forces varies in accordance with the purity of the five, *javana* thought moments in that series. (Five, instead of the normal seven javana thought-moments.) These forces are called *Kamma Vega* or Kammic energy which attracts itself to a material layer produced by two parents in the mother’s womb. The material aggregates in this germinal compound must possess such characteristics as are suitable for the reception of that particular type of Kammic energy. Attraction in this manner of various types of physical aggregate produced by parents occurs through the operation of death gives a favourable re-birth to the dying man: An unwholesome thought gives an unfavourable rebirth. Death, according to Buddhism, is not the end of the life, but the beginning of another birth.

As this last *javana* thought decisively influences his next birth for better or for worse, it is very important that the attention of the dying man must be directed or diverted by his well wishes to a good act done in his life time. King

Dutugemunu's thoughts were thus diverted by Theraputhabhaya, his one time colleague in war who later turned bhikkhu. With the help of a note book (A 'Pin Potha') in which the King had recorded his good deeds, Theraputhabhaya diverted the mind of the King from thoughts of war to a dana he had given to an Arahant when he was once besieged in battle. It is said that Dutugemunu was reborn in a deva world.

Death can occur in one of the four ways, according to Dhamma texts:

- (1) It can be due to the exhaustion of the life span assigned to beings of the particular species. This type of death is called *Ayu-kkaya*.
- (2) It can be due to the exhaustion of the Kammic energy that caused the birth of the deceased. This is called *Kamma-kaya* or *Punya-kkaya*.
- (3) Reason (1) and (2) occurring simultaneously – This is called *Ubaya-kkaya*.
- (4) Lastly it can be due to external circumstances, viz: accidents untimely happenings – working of natural phenomena or else a Kamma of a previous existence not referred to in (2). This is called *upachedaka*.

There is an excellent analogy to explain these four types of death – Viz: the analogy of the oil lamp.

The light in the oil lamp can be extinguished due to one of four causes:-

- (1) The wick in the lamp burns up. This is likened to death through the exhaustion of the life span.
- (2) The exhaustion of the oil in the lamp is likened to death through exhaustion of the Kammic energy.
- (3) Due to exhaustion of both the oil in the lamp and the burning off of the wick at the same time – is likened to death occurring through causes (1) and (2) simultaneously.
- (4) Due to external factors such as the wind blowing out the light – This is likened to the death caused through external factors.

Therefore, Kamma alone is not the cause of death. There are external causes also. In Anguttara Nikaya and elsewhere, Buddha categorically states that Kamma does not explain all happenings.

How should one best face this tragic event? By being forewarned – by reflecting that death will, and must come sooner or later. This does not mean that Buddhists should view life with gloom. Death is real, and has to be faced – and Buddhism is a religion of realism that trains its followers to face facts, however unpleasant they are – being forewarned, we will be fore-armed. If we are told that a poisonous snake lies under our chair, we will be able to take early steps to avoid danger from that source.

It is rather paradoxical that though we often see death taking toll of lives ever so often, we do not pause to reflect that we too can soon be the victims of death. This, the Buddha says, is due to a certain kind of intoxicant with strong allurements to life which drags us away from the thought that death will certainly come. The effects of this drug must be gradually removed from our system by contemplating on death whenever an opportunity arises. We will then be able to face death when it comes, with calmness, courage and confidence.

Once when the Buddha was residing at Kosambi, an argument arose among the bhikkhus over the interpretation of a *Vinaya* rule. In course of time this argument assumed serious proportion and almost led to a schism in the Sangha. Buddha tried to pacify the quarrelling bhikkhus, but failed. In desperation He left them to seek the seclusion and peace in the company of the wild beasts in the forest at Parileiyya. There He gave opportunity to an elephant and a monkey to attend to Him and reap the benefits. Buddha's departure brought wisdom to the minds of the bhikkhus who, under pressure from the laity, had to seek pardon of the Buddha and stop their quarrels. The Buddha explained to them in a sermon that this unpleasant situation arose because not one of the bhikkhus in that assembly had realised that death would come to them some day.

If, however, the monks had realised the fact of death, this alone would have stopped their quarrels.

We can derive other advantages too. We will not postpone today's work for the morrow; we will attend to our work at the proper time. Undue light-heartedness and petty thoughts will disappear. We will try to economise time and spend our lives usefully. Our duties to our wives and children will be performed at the proper time. For example our last wills will be executed early so as not to cause difficulties and problems to our heirs by the will not being written at all through waiting for old age or for a serious illness. By reflecting on the truth of importance our attitude to life will be more sober and less frivolous.

According to the Buddha, death is a subject not only to be talked about, but to be pondered over and calmly reflected on. Hence this subject is classified along with *Metta bhavana* as a *Sabbatthaka Kamatenas*, i.e. a subject of meditation that suits all times and all places. There are some who consider two other subjects also as *Sabbathaka Kammattana*, viz: impurities of the body and *Buddha Anussati* (contemplation of the Buddha).

Few words are necessary to refer to funerals and funeral rites. It is accepted that honour should be paid to the departed – No one will deny that. But is the enormous expenditure now incurred on funerals in conformity with Buddhist principles? Is the great show performed on the event of a death more for the purpose of honouring the dead or more for the purpose of satisfying the vanity

of the living? This requires a dispassionate examination in our minds to ascertain where the line should be drawn.

Then, are the wreaths of flowers heaped around the dead and proudly displayed in procession – to be burnt in a few hours? To me it looks more sensible more in line with Buddhist views, if this money spent on flowers is given away to a charitable institution, and merit so gathered be transferred to the departed.

One more question! Can death be overcome? The answer is – Yes! Death is there because of birth – *Jati Paccaya Jara Maranam*. These are two links in the cycle of existence, better known by the name *Paticca Samuppada*. Altogether there are 12 links in this cycle, some of which are *Klesas* or impurities. Some *Kamm*s or actions give rise to *vipakas* ( in this cycle – rebirth ) and *vipakas* or re-birth produces *Klesas* and so on, this cycle is repeated *ad infinitum*. This repetition of countless births is called *Samsara*. If this cycle of existence is to be stopped, it can be cut off only at the stage of impurities, viz: *Avijja* (ignorance) and *Tanha* (craving) – These are the roots in this cycle of births that have to be exterminated. Therefore cut off *Tanha* and *Avijja* – birth is overcome, death is overcome, *Samsara* is transcended and *Nibbana* attained.

Buddha expresses the same idea in a different way elsewhere He says: To attain the goal of Nibbana, attachment to sense pleasures must be overcome – and for that purpose, subduing these pleasures of the sense reflection on death is very helpful. “There is one Dhamma” says the Buddha, which when practised and, developed, lead to aversion from sense pleasures which in turn lead to the realisation of the Noble Truths and the attainment of Nibbana. And what is that Dhamma? The reply is “Reflection on Death”.

Such being the case, let us make the start to practise mindfulness of death now, and continue to do so whenever an opportunity arises, for this is a meditation that brings much benefit - ALWAYS.

## ON DEATH

The single most important thing I’ve ever learned was that I’m going to die. For once you accept your own death, all of a sudden you are free to live. You no longer care except so far as your life can be used tactically – to promote a cause you believe in.

*(The late American organiser, Saul Alinsky)*

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