

Death and the Buddhist

by *Danavira*

Audio available at: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/audio/details?num=OM468>

Talk given at Padmaloka Retreat Centre, Men's Event 2000

Introduction

These by the way are my new bifocals. It's only the second time I've actually worked with them and they are *great*. As long as I don't do this and it goes all blurred, but I do this, that means I can look up at you. That's why I got bifocals. [Laughter] All right, this is a talk – you mean taking them off, that was the joke, right? That might be the only joke in the talk, but I do have a joke. Now, those of you who have ever told a joke to this number of sophisticated urbane people, you are going to be with me on this. It's a joke I heard on the radio and it's about death and there aren't that many jokes about death, but if you've heard it please do not shout out the answer.

“So a married couple aged 90 decide that they are going to get divorced. So someone goes along to them and says, “Look you've left it a bit late haven't you?” And they say, “Well, we decided we would wait until the children were dead.”

[Audience laughter]

I couldn't have paid all of you to laugh, that must be funny.

Now this talk started out as “Death and the Buddhist” and I'd not long got into avoiding doing it when my mother took ill. And then, without aplomb and timing, there she is, down there, she *died*. And I thought, “Well, it's good that - I have a good excuse and good reason for not doing this and I could just ring up the people in Norwich and say, ‘My mother died, etc.’” But, then I thought about it and thought, actually one of the things about my mother I remember is that in her prime she was operated on by the doctors, I'm told five times, and she used to be knocked down and then she'd bounce back up. She had a lot of resilience. And I thought, “Well it's not fair of me just to use her as an excuse for basically not wanting to do any work.” So I decided I *would* do the talk and then because Parinirvana day came up, the Council thought, “Well why don't I do the talk here as well?” So that's why I'm standing here. So it's not the same talk as the one I did on Tuesday, I've cut out huge chunks of it – of poetry – you'll be glad to know.

Being Human and Being Buddhist

Right, I'm going to try to work with you now. Here we go. So the very first thing to say is this. As far as death goes, I know nothing, right? I don't know anything. But, actually as I look round I know none of you know anything either. So we are in a way in the same boat – we are none the wiser about death, though we have to make an effort and we do try. But the first thing I'd like to say about death and the Buddhist is that first of all I'm a

human being. I'm a human being first and a Buddhist second. And that's important to me because I think that historically people with religious views don't mind persecuting and oppressing folk who don't actually believe their views or even their version of the same views. So I'm a human being first, and I actually feel that the Buddhist Dharma - that's its whole tendency. The tendency is, humanity comes first before, in a way, the doctrine and the Dharma. There's no point being a great Buddhist, but having no sense of concern for human beings just as themselves, as human beings. The Buddhadharma is first and foremost a compassionate view.

The other thing I'd like to also say in preparation for saying a wee bit more is a line by Padmasambhava that I remember and I like. I believe Padmasambhava said this to his disciples:

*"Always remember this and you won't go far wrong.
I do not know, I do not have, I do not understand."*

I like that again because it gives me a lot of leeway. I don't have to pretend to you that I know, or I have, or even that I understand. There's a sense of freedom for me in that. I remember when I was a student how, and I don't know how it happened, I got into this mindset where I had to know, everything. But the thing about being a student is that the more you learn, the more you understand, you don't know, if you see what I mean - it's an endless process. And one day when I was a student somebody asked me something. It could have been perfectly trivial, but I broke the habit that several years in an education industry had developed in me. I said, "I don't know." And it was a bit of a liberation, it was a bit of a relief to say, "I don't know." So, that's fair enough, I'm all right about that. I don't know, I don't have, I don't understand.

Life as a Condition for Death

Now a little quote here:

"Death has 10,000 several doors for men to take their exits."

That's by John Webster in the *Duchess of Malfey* (1612). Now, just to let you know, by reading through a few books on death one comes across quotes like this. And that's where I got that actually. I haven't read the *Duchess of Malfey* and I'm never likely to actually. But we all know that, about death having 10,000 several doors, okay. But for the Buddhadharma what we have to remember if nothing else is that death (might seem a strange thing to say) only arises in dependence on birth. If you aren't born then you don't die, which seems a bit nonsensical to us, but from the Buddhist perspective this is something that we have to understand about death. You only die if first you are born.

And we *are* born, that's the thing. We have been born and now we are alive and yes, we will all die. Every one of us is going to die. Say that again? Every one of us has got to die. There's a wee protestant in here, a wee Kirk minister in a previous life, perhaps, wants to make sure you understand that you are all going to die. And myself as well. As I

said earlier, I was saying to someone in Norwich, "Look I'm going to say we are all going to die." and this guy said, "Could you exclude me from that please?" [Audience laughter] I knew him as well, he's been around the FWBO for donkeys' years, and I said, "Okay." [Laughter] So when I said, "We are all going to die, except for my friend here," he smiled and we all laughed. And he knew it - he knew there were no exceptions to this rule whatsoever.

Posing Questions - Where Were We Born and Do We Know We are Going to Die?

So there's all sorts of ways to die. And when I was thinking about that, and bearing in mind you don't die unless you are born, I asked myself a question which I'm going to ask you. We might find something interesting. Let me say this, in Norwich there was no response of any interest at all to this question.

Do we have in the community here any interesting places of birth? Is there anybody born in an interesting place, e.g. the back of a black cab, between Heathrow and Victoria?

Yes?

[Audience member] I wasn't born in the back of a cab. I was born in Africa. I find that interesting.

[Laughter]

I'm sure we *all* find that quite interesting as well. Okay, so Africa, not bad, Africa. But wait, wait, hold it, was it in a house or was it in a hospital in Africa ?

[Audience member] A hospital.

Aaah no, everybody gets born in a hospital these days. No, something, anybody else, anything? Yes?

[Audience member] I was born on the side of a volcano.

[Ooooooooooooooh] ... now is there anybody on *these islands* that's got somewhere interesting? Nothing else? We've got a volcano, we've got Africa. Anything else? Nobody? No? So it's true, we are born at home or else in hospital. Right, oh fair enough. Now the next question I've got to ask people is a sort of serious question. Does everyone actually know that they are going to die? Does anybody actually know this?

[Audience silence]

No... [Audience laughter] Well look, is it a surprise for anybody to know that they are going to die? Are you surprised? Are you sure you're not surprised? Right, so everybody here knows they are going to die. Right, this is great. I was telling a friend of mine who said, "You've got to ask those questions, its called 'audience participation.'" [Laughter] And believe me you really *have* participated, thank you. [Laughter]

Definitions of Death and Life

Anyway, my *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* makes these suggestions for death:

The final cessation of the vital functions of an animal or plant.

The loss or cessation of life.

Now it does actually go on, but it doesn't really say much more than that. That's essentially what it does say. Now life meanwhile is equally broad in meaning. For life what we get is:

The period from birth to death, primarily the condition, quality or fact of being a living person.

The property which differentiates a living person from a dead one.

So the definition of "dead" is if you're not alive and the definition of "alive" is if you're not dead. [Laughter] That seems to be it. But since we all know we are going to die we all have a working idea of what death is, we've got a working idea. But there can be exceptions, and I was reading Lyall Watson's book on the *Biology of Death*. During the 19th century it was a bit of a cultural maker of angst with people worried about being buried alive, and often it did happen. And he gives an example, and one of the examples I thought was, well at least bizarrely humorous, was that a man was lying dead and they bring him in and put him on the autopsy table and the doctor gets his knife and he was just about to cut the guy open [makes sound of flesh being cut] and suddenly the corpse puts a hand up and grabs him by the throat. [makes sound of 'strangled cry'] [Audience laughter] And he's like this. [makes sound of strangled cry] And so they realize the guy's alive. [Laughter] But the doctor drops dead. [Audience laughter]

And you think that was funny, oh. [Audience laughs] And you think that was funny, all right! That doctor was probably a married man with kids! [Audience laughs] All right, anyway, he dropped dead actually. So there are some exceptions, but most of us know what we are talking about when we talk about death.

How We Can Destroy Our Life in Fleeing from Death

Now another thing about death, I think I can say quite safely, is that everybody, well most of us, fear death. Sometimes we can quite strongly fear death, and sometimes we can feel quite sanguine about it. But actually it does cause an awful lot of fear in our lives, and it pursues us, well sometimes, certainly when I was younger it pursued me on a daily basis. As I've got older, well I was imagining when we are young and in the room of our life this thing starts appearing, right? And you think, "That's death." And you feel really weird and creepy about it. You see when you get to being middle aged it's sort of formed - it's a lot more solid. So what you do, is you put your TV set on top of it, [Laughter] right? And what you do is you can sort of sit back and there's your telly on top of the table called death and you just sit back with your six-pack and think, well [Audience laughter] well, what next? So I think that is a difference between middle-aged people like myself and when I was younger.

Now this is just a small thing, and I won't name the man. He was telling me of a dream last week and he said, "I had this dream about death and there was something really really frightening." And so he told me the dream. And what it was, he goes into in a strangely uncanny room, rather bare, and there's his mum and dad - who are both dead -

standing there and he sort of says, “Oh, well, I’m going to die.” But the *big* moment that really got him worried was how in some way his plastics were taken off him. His Visa card and his American Express perhaps, I don’t know if he’s got that, but his plastics were taken away and he was staring at the wall without his credit cards and then he felt really bereft. [Audience laughter] He felt really bereft and so when you get to heaven, American Express, etc. will not do nicely. [Silence] Thank you. [Laughter]

I did a night school course in being a standup comedian and failed. [Laughter] Anyway, he felt really bad, he felt really bad when they took his plastics away. And of course the good thing about that, I mean what is so obvious about that, is that the plastics represent money, represent power, represent ego extension, represent the opportunity to jump on a plane and go somewhere else and don’t come back, or do this or do that, and take away your plastics and what have you got left? So it’s actually a very interesting and useful metaphor for maybe modern personalities? Maybe in the old days it would have been gold or something.

Anyhow death can tear us apart. This fear, this knowledge. We can destroy our life in fleeing from it in pursuit of safety. Yet that safety within the terms of the life we lead, we know does not exist. And all of us here know we are going to die, we’ve already established that and all of us march daily towards this certain fate. Every one of us marches daily towards this certain fate. Now death, when we look at it and we let it when we look at it frankly or sometimes it just troubles us or pursues us, it can be like a wedge. Death driven through our being, through our heart, knowing that we are, knowing that one day we will *not* be. Now we might be reconciled to our own death, or numbed, or living in a stupor about uneasy truths about it, but then there is everybody else. Our nearest and dearest. They are mortal too and will die as well as us. We are attached to them and pain ensues. Usually to live is to be attached and to love is to be attached and attachment often means actual loss or the fear of it.

Life as Condition for Death, Death as Natural Part of Life

Now I was saying to people, a parent for me - a sensitive parent - is somebody who sits with their feet in a river of fire. For a sensitive parent. I did hear of a family in Wales who finally the last child was taken from them when they started keeping it in a cage. That was after 20 years of social work intervention. So some people do have children, but they are not very sensitive. But a sensitive parent is like having your feet in a river of fire. And it’s perfectly obvious to a Buddhist I think, if you just think about it for a moment. As a flower needs the elements of its sustenance so does our human heart need friendship and love.

The very doors, though, that death knocks upon, we have built with our lives out of necessity. And death knocks upon the doors of our flesh. It is an ingredient essential to the consistency of our senses, which make our world dualistic, flooded with opposites. Where there is life there is death. To paraphrase Buddhaghosa in the *Path of Purity*, and I want to just read this, it’s a paraphrase of Buddhaghosa. I’m concerned to stay in contact with you. But, on the other hand, I want to express the rhythms of the language:

“When we are born, we are born along with ageing and death. The cremation fires shine in our eyes. The undertaker’s hands are upon us even as we lie in our mother’s arms. Our lives are frail, dependent on so many things: food, shelter, sleep, how hot or cold it is and much more, in an ocean of conditions. Nor do we know when we will die, or where or by what means - disease, an accident - from all directions the ways and means and moment of our end can come. Our future is signless, unpredictable, yet certain to fall. Even if we lived 100 years, this is still short. But we might die young. None among us ever knows – all the evidence bears this out. Our common human past is full of great beings. People develop the most high qualities with lives meritorious and great understanding, even enlightened ones. Yet all have gone from this mundane world, which is ablaze with birth and conditioned life and resultant death. Why should we stand out alone fated to outwit and master death when even the Buddhas go, leaving a pool of dust? It is unbelievable to think that we shall stay here. When we think of our body, what makes us think that by means of it, we will change the course of history? As if the long known processes of our lives would stop in the face of pressure from our heart? Every mirror that shone back our foolish face would crack on these reflections of a hopeless case, thinking life, like thinking like this can only make us laugh. Outside our body lies the vast world, the storm and spray of myriad lives. It is the same upon our flesh and within it. Countless beings, creatures born to live and die finding their meat upon us, making a life out of our flesh they cover us inside and out like the stars. As clouds pass in the sky above, so disease billows about us at all times testing us with clouds of illness. We are like a besieged city, with a thousand gates, ever vulnerable, faced with defeat. Why should we be stupidly proud, combing our foolishness into an idiocy? All of us know this, but every dawn brings forth a forest of hopes. Our hard-earned truths jut out, passed over in favor of a dream. All the mundane victories: wealth, status, power, progeny, unlimited extension of ourself, our name and reputation to resound down throughout time somehow beyond our death even as we live forever. All success like this lies easily within the grasp of death and hence destruction. Everything like this without doubt will be taken away from us. Mundane failure is carved upon our face, even in the womb. If we are blind to our potential, in our depths we will fail, even here which is the worst pain. For in our depths lies the key to our freedom. Without freedom our lives are always stopped by death, which comes among us wielding weapons, an aspect of a murderer. We flee, yet where is there to go? The long shadow of our end is made by our beginning. Is there no insight to be gathered here by us? Only a single point of a wheel ever touches the ground even as it speeds along. So it is with the moments of our human lives, which each in its turn rises and falls, appears and disappears. Short is our moment of life in the ultimate sense. Is there no insight to be gathered here by us?”

That’s a paraphrase by Buddhaghosa. Buddhists view death then as a natural part of life. It is one of the conditions we could say for life to arise, without which it would not arise.

The Arising of the Buddhadharma

One of the core stories of the arising of the Buddhadharma concerns the Four Sights. So we go right to the very core of the human condition with the Buddhist Dharma, right

from the beginning. The human being who became the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama saw these sights and such was the effect on his life that he left everything he knew and had and went forth in search of wisdom and truth. And these Four Sights were: sick person, an old person, a dead person and a seeker after truth.

For the first time Siddhartha Gautama understood the processes of dissolution that are inherent in our lives. Once born there is no turning back from death, no standing still of the stream of life, no ever-clear sky of perfect health. Yet wisdom, he understood, was possible. Insight can be gained into the nature of the life we lead. This seeker after truth that Siddhartha saw, seeded with the gaze of aspiration, reminded him.

So the Buddhadharma's foundation is in human experience, perennial, incisive, of the heart of our matter. No divine voice spoke or ordained the Buddhadharma. No angels poured out of a heaven to announce Siddhartha's fate. He was born in the breath and blood like us, carried within his mother's flesh for the necessary months. His place of maternity was the side of a road where his mother stood holding a tree for stability as the child left her body and fell to the earth. Dust was his fate from the beginning. He had the same marks as ourselves, similar experiences. A human being born as we are born who awakened his mind to become a Buddha.

Overcoming Fear of Death, Mirrors to View Death

Thus Buddhists have always tried to face our human reality as openly as they can. They try to be realistic, they oppose pessimism, they encourage themselves and others to live to a purpose and wise happiness even in the face of death. Fear of death, then, is something a Buddhist tries to overcome - to conquer it before he or she is conquered by it. It is not a passive relationship between Death and the Buddhist. It is a struggle to the finish, whatever that would be, but which would ideally be an emancipation, a profound understanding of mind. If this seems strange to you, what you have to realize is that the Buddhist life is a strenuous one. It is a life of active awareness. Even in the deepest stillness a Buddhist would express vivacity. Death we know is not unexpected for a Buddhist. This is reflected doctrinally in the teaching of the Three Marks or Lakshanas of human existence:

The first mark is that everything is impermanent – all things change.

The second is that everything is insubstantial in itself. Everything is a composite of other things, composed in endless processes, combined and interrelated.

The third mark is that everything is *dukkha*, is unsatisfactory. Happiness always bears its burden of pain. Joy today, gone tomorrow, it can be suffering, it can be sorrow.

The second and third view can be included in the first, for they arise in consequence of it. Everything is impermanent. Things then are not really things. They are more properly to be understood as processes, as dynamics, as streams combining and dissolving endlessly, interpenetrated. Because nothing is fixed, we need not remain in the chains of our

upbringing. Not only can we free ourselves, we can decide a direction in which to shape our mind. That direction for the Buddhist is the awakened mind, Enlightenment, Buddhahood. Life therefore takes on the aspect of practice. For a Buddhist death is a part of life, death is a part of the practice of the Buddhists life. This is easy to say, but we have already agreed that death can be a source of great fear. Dealing squarely with death as part of life requires sensitivity, not only towards others but *especially* towards oneself. There are at least two general ways of dealing with death in life amongst us which aren't very good. I forgot to say that.

One is flight, into sentimentality, the booze, etc. or plunging our head into a TV set, metaphorically speaking. A story from the Sufis that I might have got slightly wrong, never mind:

A young man goes to the market. He's standing there looks up there's death. Death is looking at him. Death waves. Young man runs away. Jumps on a horse and rides out of Isfahan fast and furious. Rides for hours and hours and hours and hours and hours... to Samakan. When he's in Samakan, finds a house, locks the door, sits down, its dark. Says to himself, I've done it, I've made it. Knock on the door, he opens the door. Death is standing there. Death says, "I was just waving at you this morning to say I'd meet you in Samakan this evening!" [Audience laughs]

Aaargh! oooh. I got that line from Parami and she got it from Rumi or somebody or other.

The other failing way to deal with death is by *fight*. For example, cynicism or looking resolutely the other way, or fitting dentures to our heart - metaphorically speaking - so that we can grip them. And I have an example here, which gives me a chance to sing a song. An example of fight when we deal with death and it's from an image I remember seeing, a scene from the movie *Oh What a Lovely War*. I don't know if you know this one, but it's a trench, and all the live soldiers are in the trench and it's a sunny day and a guy comes out and he's stripped to the waist and there's a foot sticking out the trench, right, a leg sticking out the trench with a boot on it. And it's a dead soldier's limb and he hangs his mirror on the foot. And there's the mirror, there's the foot, and there's the mirror and he's shaving and they are all there. And as he shaves he sings:

*"Bombed last night and bombed the night before.
Bombed again tomorrow if you've never been bombed before."*

And they all sing like that, right? And there's this dead body as a prop with the guy being able to shave. So, in a way, I think that this is an example of hardening, that's about fighting death and armoring ourselves and it doesn't actually work either.

As usual there is a middle way between these opposites, where we neither run away nor harden ourselves. But death and all it implies is best not treated lightly in view of the fear that it can create and this is hard for us, as our culture is full of superficial death dealing images.

Now just last week I came back from an Order weekend. It was Saturday I came back early and I go in and I switch on the television and what I saw was one movie. I saw a bit of one movie and there were four people killed in that movie in the time I saw it right. And then I switched onto another movie, *Married to the Mob* or something, and the bit I saw two people were killed. And they were all brutally killed. So I'm looking at this and what I noticed too is that in addition to the deaths some of the people involved in these killings, either directly or tangentially found love at the end of the film, which solved everything, like an all conquering amphetamine. [Laughter] Now from the deeper end of the swimming pool of our ordinary mind, limited and self-limiting we might think being able to sit through a stream of such brutalized images could mean that we have dealt with death, like the cigarette smokers deal with the fumes in their lungs, in casual exhalation, imaging ease and resolution. [exhales as if exhaling cigarette smoke] Sorted! So this is how one might foolishly think one has dealt with death. I love doing this. I did this several times on Tuesday. [Inhaling and exhaling as if smoking] And then you say, "Sorted!" Right, that's death, "Sorted!" Voice of truth here speaking now. Not so! Not so. It's not sorted at all.

A personal experience. When Buddhists practice the spiritual life they challenge their minds, they upset their prejudices, habits and their usual human vacuousness. Ajita and I once set out to challenge our minds on the issue of death and every night we would recite the root verses of the six Bardos seven times. These Bardos are traditionally seen as the intermediate states between death [Sound effect] and birth [Baby crying] [Laughter] and all this we did at midnight when the country slumbered. And all unintegrated forces could find a place in the I. And we practiced and after a week or so people walked around, large white it seemed to us through drifts of futility, every action contained in itself and equal and opposite grey shadow of destruction. We were in fact succeeding in making death tinged normality ... I completely my lost my way there ... we were succeeding in death tinged normality, I don't know what that means either, that's alright. [Audience laughs] What we were trying to do, we were actually being successful – was it Spring? Was it Autumn? Or was it both combined, life and death dancing in amalgam, swaying in a new reality? We could not keep it up. The sunlight in our eyes was bleaching the world and graves bubbled everywhere and doom pointing time cremation dust filled the streets. One day it dawned on us. [Dramatic pause] We were depressed. [Audience laughs]

Now some of you might have foolishly thought I was going to say we were enlightened, at least stream entrants? No, we were depressed, we were depressed. And what do you do when you get depressed? Well, we stopped that practice [Audience laughs] and we felt as though the fountain of life welled up in us again and we felt we had been born again and the warm red sea rolled in and I found my voice. It was, oh what a day. I stood in a rowing boat in a loch somewhere with Dhammarati just shouting and bellowing at the hills and I felt so glad to have escaped from death, it was such a relief. We decided we had run out of positive emotion and had succumbed to an experience of death in life as the wasteland. A few years later I tried alone, for I had the taste for the sharp fierceness of the practice and what I thought of as its cold desolation. I remember the streets of the city cracking, or so I thought, in the tension between meaning and futility – I wanted that.

Eight weeks into this practice I was sitting on a number 20 bus going up the Great Western Road. Rain streaked the windows. I saw my reflection in the weeping glass and recognized that I had been gently teased into... depression. [All laugh] Yeah, but you didn't give up did you? Again I gave up. Now actually when you look at it, we were looking at death and we got a result. We were actually quite depressed, the pair of us, and I got depressed a second time, but in a way it was a result actually. And it does say, does tell us that we must not be too blithe about death and think we can deal with it. It's not like that at all, I believe, it's not as easy as that.

So I think that we must approach death with care and like the Gorgon's head it may be best viewed in reflection. Now Ajita came to his own terms with death. Cancer pursued him for several years - sometimes raucous, sometimes silent - finally deadly. He was 46 when he died and I carried out his funeral. Now, I just want to do something, that when I was thinking about Ajita, I want to just indicate to you what death by cancer in a way is like by a sound. It goes like this:

[SOUND AS IF A WHIP against body] Oooh! [as if agonised cry]
[SOUND AS IF A WHIP against body] Oooh! [as if agonised cry]
[SOUND AS IF A WHIP against body] Oooh! [as if deeper agonised cry]
[SOUND AS IF A WHIP against body] Oooh! [as if deeper agonised cry – less long]

Now Ajita went on like that for a year.

[SOUND AS IF A WHIP against body] Oooh! [as if deep and less energised agonised cry]

Now he was a big fine man, and when I saw him in his coffin, he was a total skeleton. So you know, we have to laugh, yes that's true, but when cancer calls. [Silence]

And Ajita died.

All that acts are mirrors to view death as are the very many direct meditative practices and reflections that Buddhists have generated over the centuries. By these means we can make an approach to death and its commonly perceived long fingers of loss, grief, isolation and despair, with some hope of personal safety and understanding. In other words, practices help us to approach obliquely something that perhaps is too terrible for us to look at face-to-face for most of us.

Reflections on the Dying and Death of My Mother

A few words now on my mother's death on the 10th of January in the year 2000 at 5 a.m. in the Royal Infirmary. I was on my way to a retreat, to the Chairman's retreat, and I rang up my mother and she says to me, "Your father's got the flu; your brother's got the flu. They are absolutely knocked for six and I don't actually think you should come up because you might get the flu." And I say, "No I'm not really wanting the flu, ma." And she said, "Well, I'm not being funny son, but I don't think you should come up," because

I only visit Glasgow periodically. I said, "I understand ma, I won't come." So anyway I go on the retreat, a couple of days go by – this is a Monday I talk to her - and by the Thursday I get a phone call to ring my sister. I ring her up, my sister is at her wits end, and she's absolutely done in. Turns out my mother's been seriously ill with the flu as well.

And my sister told me several times about funny scenes of taking my mother to the loo. And my mother was no lightweight okay, she's no lightweight, there's my dad who's dying of the flu. There's my ma who's comatose with the flu and there's my sister having to carry my mother to the toilet. So they take my ma to the toilet, my poor 88-year-old da, and my sister was saying they'd be getting back into the bedroom and my sister would be trying to put my mother down on the bed and my mother would just fall backwards [creak-stretch sound] and my sister would be stretched out underneath my mother [Audience laughs] laughing her head off. You know laughing and there's my poor old mother, completely comatose, lying on top of her and my poor old father is like this. [pose made]

Anyway it got too much for my sister and my other sister was coming up from London the next day, so I decided I would stay on the retreat. Anyway, she was taken into hospital that Friday, I think, and according to my sister by the way, which shows you that some people can be less than sensitive, when the district nurse turned up she looked at my mother in the bed and in the presence of my mother and my sister, said to my sister, "Your mothers dying." Just like that she said, apparently, and then she said, "Yeah, she's had a stroke." And then according to my sister, the district nurse then looked in the mirror and sorted her hair. Which is really sort of, well she needs lessons in sensitivity, let's face it. So off goes my mother to the infirmary.

Abhyakurti brings me to Glasgow and I get down there and he goes away. And I drive down into the Royal Infirmary and there's my mother lying there, and she's out - she's not there at all, she's in a coma of some kind. So we go through all the rigmarole and one of the things about the rigmarole about dying and death is that certainly nobody really finally wants to say it, nobody wants to say, "Oh, God, she's going to die or ...". It's all couched in maybe it won't, maybe it will – it all gets very, it gets, well it's full of unknowns. You just don't know what's going to go down next. So, anyway, we spend time with my mother. My father and my brother could not come to the hospital. They were too ill. So it was me and my two sisters and we, well, in the end we managed to get her to come alive and speak to us and she came out and we held her, we held her hands, we touched her, we reassured her and she surfaced for once or twice and she said, "What's up with me?" (a bit like that) and we said, "It's the flu ma, and its in your chest". But we didn't say, "It's pneumonia, ma." Known as the old person's friend. So all her vital functions were normal, she should have actually lived, but she didn't live. And when me and my sisters went away, when I was lying in Heruka thinking about my mother from my heart I told her to her heart, "If you want to die it's okay. It's okay to die. Don't worry about us, don't think about us. Just let go and die." And that's what I told her. In a way, that's in a way, what I expected.

And we went there on the Sunday and I leaned over to my mother just before I left and I put my cheek to her cheek and it was so warm and soft. You look at old people's faces and you think, they look a bit like old rhinos or something that that. But when you touch, touch face-to-face it was so warm and it was so soft and I kissed my mother and my mouth was so dry and she kissed me and I think the last sight I had of her alive was my head on her head and our eyes looking into each others eyes, although her eyes were pretty blurred in a sense. So we just looked at each other, I said I'd see her later and I never did. That was it. I never did because she died 5 o'clock the next morning. I guess one of the messages and meanings about that is: never put off tomorrow what you think you've got to do today when you're dealing with somebody who's going to die.

My Mothers Death: 50 years Earlier - A Prophetic Eye? Meeting and Responding to the Wider World After Her Death

There are two little things I'd just like to say here. An image, a memory comes back to me as a child and I'm about four I've worked out. I'm four years of age and standing in Cathedral Street, Glasgow, which is where we used to live. And I'm standing there and my mother is standing here. And she's *big*, my mother, certainly in comparison to me. She's a big burly woman in her prime. You know, she's had three children, she's got big hips, she's got big breasts, and she's big. And on top of that her thyroid, unbeknown to us is wobbly, so she's been up and down, up and down, up and down, right - but she's big. She's standing talking to my father and my father's looking at her and she's looking at my father and I'm looking at the two of them and I'm not sure what's going on actually but I know something's happening. And behind my father is his work, Mossman's, where he polishes marble. And somehow I remembered that scene and somehow I always want to add to it that the sunlight was falling on us all. The sunlight was falling on us all and its 1954. Who was alive in 1954 in the summer? Show me your hands please. The sunlight was falling on us all, yes? And it fell on my ma, my dad and me. Now, if I had turned round and looked behind me, I would have seen the Royal Infirmary - but I never thought to look. And if I had looked closely and with an eye of prophecy I would have seen Ward 2 and Ward 5 because they are visible there where my ma was taken half a century later to die, and indeed she did die.

Now one or two little things about this. I went there at 6 o'clock in the morning. I got there before my family. My mother was dead for an hour and I was put in a room, a very desolate room of very high ceilings with these high neon lights - they sit up there like sort of vultures looking down at you and it was a terrible room and I thought, "What the hell am I doing sitting here?" And I get up and, well, I meet the nurse who's a nice kind wee birdie, but she's looking up at me and I say, "Look I'm a Buddhist. I'm trying to get over her, etc. I'm a Buddhist and according to my faith," when you're dealing with conventional people that have a faith, it's quite good to have a faith, "According to my faith I should spend time with my mother's dead body as soon as possible." "Oh, yes, son come with me." So we go in and there's my mother laid out and this is marvelous. She looks so peaceful, right. So I decide I shall talk to this woman, my mother. So I sit down, I sit down and all that's between us and all those other old people and sick women, cos it's a women's ward, all that's between us is a curtain. But what can I do? So I whisper

quietly into her ear and I say, “Ma, you’re dead.” She doesn’t answer back. [Audience quietly laughs] “You’re dead ma, right?” and I say, “Look just let go, relax, its okay, everything’s fine.” And then I said, “Go towards the light.” Cos she was in a way a Catholic and you can’t say, “Go towards the Buddha,” and I certainly didn’t want to say, “Go towards the cross.” So I say, [“What cross son, Glasgow cross?” Audience laughs] “No ma, the Great Cross in the sky.” So anyway, I said. “Go towards the light.”

And then I wonder where my family are, so I go out and there’s the rest of the ward and there’s elderly women sitting on the end of the bed. [makes sound like coughing, throat rattling] It’s six or seven in the morning, but there’s no rest for these people, no rest for the ill, and they are all sort of [makes coughing/rattling/clearing throat sounds]. But as I walk I look, there’s a younger woman, a younger woman and she’s halfway out of bed looking at me and she’s terrified and I feel sorry for her, but actually I feel sorry for her, but that’s the way it is dear. People die, this woman my ma has died, you can hear it, I’m really sorry, but you’re going to have to carry on listening. So I just didn’t bother whether it upset her or it didn’t. And my sister did speak to this woman, and did say, “Yes this woman was terrified.” The death in the next bed had terrified her. And its very unfair in a hospital, particularly young people when somebody drops dead in the ward and the body is, left there, its covered with a curtain and everybody knows something has happened and its turned into a catastrophe, which it needn’t be, so that’s the way it is. So that was the people in the ward.

Now two little things I just want to get out here. On my way after my mum was dead, I’m driving along the Great Western road, strange to say, I stop at the traffic lights. I look to my left and in the traffic going the other way there’s a girl, there’s a woman - she’s not a girl, she’s a woman. And she’s sitting in a car and she’s facing the way she’s going to drive and her head comes back, her head comes back like that [demonstrates] and I’m looking at her head, and then it comes forward, like that, right? And what that image tells me is, I understand how we live with so deeply imprinted notions of eternalism. It was the gesture of her head, the looking forward of her mind and eye, into the road into the distance, not thinking that death might be waiting there for her in a car crash or anything. It’s that look and I recognized that look in my own life and indeed in all our lives. It made me realize how eternalism works through our lives.

And then, going up the Byers Road one night to the Evolution shop, there’s a delicatessen and I’m carrying my shopping. And as I come up, a girl comes out the delicatessen and she’s carrying a cup of coffee, she’s carrying a cake. She works in the delicatessen, she’s not wearing a coat or anything, and she’s got a pinny. She walks slightly up in front of me. I’m interested, what is this about? She goes up to the doorway of the shop next to the delicatessen, she puts her hands into the darkness of the doorway, hands come out of the darkness of the doorway, take the coffee and the cake. I’m uplifted by that [pause] I’m uplifted by that [longer pause]. So, I walk up and look casually to see what’s going on – it’s a man down on his luck. It’s a man being destroyed. It’s a man living on the street. It’s a man with nothing. And it pleased and pleased and made me feel good that the people in this delicatessen so cared enough for this person, this total stranger, that they gave something. They were generous and as far as I’m concerned every generous act resounds on all our hearts and every unskillful act shatters our hearts as well. So when I

see generosity I'm uplifted, it's great. Now I walked by this guy and I decide I can't go by this act of generosity and not do something so I reach into my pocket and there's a pound coin. I walk back and I give the man a pound and we look at each other. Just for a moment we look at each other as two human beings and then [makes finger click sound] the nihilism of his expectations creeps in and I withdraw from him, for I don't wish to be involved. But for a moment we *were* involved one being with another. So I just wanted to say that.

Continuities and Interconnections In and Across Life and Death

Here we go. I'm going to read on. In my mother's dying face, I saw her father's face. Since I take after her, I saw my own dying. I will look like her who looked like him who showed in his features that garring of time in the flesh that makes a family face. She was dead when I got there and when I saw her she was sinking into herself as I watched and yet I spoke to her. All the world faded away for her, if there was bewilderment for her there was also joy. She had sprung up in a slow rising, the weight of daily cares gone. An easy loss to bear for her face, it seemed, for its flesh laid down the masks of burden and now could be itself. Just as it is a freedom, searching, groping, and almost beyond belief, a finding of something of itself. I likened her to a stream clearing itself. Prone on this bed of death she saw the fires of my death at my birth and looked upon her own mortal blaze in the fiery exchange of being [pause] when I was born.

Now I'd like to amend a poem here. The only poem I'm going to read by (Hugh) MacDiarmid. It's called *At My Fathers Grave*. But this is for my mother. Ill just read it in Scots:

The sunlight still on me, you row'd in clood,
We look upon each ither noo like hills
Across a valley. I'm nea mair your son.
It's my mind' nae son o' yours that looks,
And the great darkness o' your death comes up
And equals it across the way'
A livin' man upon a deid man thinks
And any sma'er thocht's impossible.

So there is loss, yet there are continuities. Brian Aldiss, the writer, noted how he became possessor and possessed by what he called the "Aldiss Face." It jumped the centuries and the generations - the rock beneath the façade of youth, the mark of connection that rises in and out of time, binding flesh and bone. At my mother's funeral party, I saw this astonishingly - people who looked like their parents unbelievably. Young people who looked so different from their parents and who had become so like them as they had aged. In his book, *The Isles*, Norman Davis tells how at the end of the last Ice Age a young man was buried. In 1903 his body was discovered in the area of Cheddar Gorge. In 1996 a sample of DNA was taken from it and compared with samples taken from a number of volunteers from among the villages of the present Cheddar district. They were looking for a match - they found one. Mr. Adrian Target, aged 42, a history teacher. He was a direct

descendant through the maternal line of a person who lived in that approximate area 10,000 years before - 8 Millennia BCE. Wow! Fantastic, isn't it? There are continuities and by the way everybody here had an ancestor in the Ice Age. It's okay, don't feel deprived. [Audience laughs]

Death may be seen as part of the condition of being human. Buddhists are merely human beings who practice a particular path in order that we deal usefully, effectively and happily with that condition. All of us are individually trying to deal with our experience of being human. All the dead are like echoes in the rooms of our home, they can affect us like faded letters, folded up and worn, discovered in our back pocket. Heartfelt exchanges that turned the ink to blood. All reveal across the centuries how death happens individually, and yet from a wider view each forms a part of a unity. And our death will happen to us individually, without a doubt, and we in our time will be part of that unity which is the past

The Truth of Loss of Life: The State of Mind - The Deathless State

How are we to deal with the certain truth of the loss of our life? For deal with it we must. The Buddhist deals with it by trying to break through to a deeper and truer understanding of the nature of the lives we lead. From that deeper understanding of the lives we lead, the Buddhist gradually recognizes the Dharmic Truth - that there is a state of mind of being called [pause] The Deathless. The Deathless, a state of being, we might say, beyond the grip of death. This does not mean that we would live forever, for to be beyond the grip of death for the Buddhist is to also be beyond the grasp of life. How do our ordinary lives look to a being in the Deathless State?

It looks like this. Our life is made by our mind - led by it. Should we live with a mind corrupted by negativity then misery will follow. Should our minds be purified and free of such negative traits our actions will follow suit and happiness arises. We make the lives we lead, and nothing need bind us when we understand this. All too often, though, we can lead a life that buries us. No wonder we fear the grave. It may be the state of our heart. Habits, superficiality and vagueness – these are the forces that drive us down into a drowning in time. From the deathless state our ordinary lives look like they are lived upon a wheel of fire, where most of us rage in flames of self-addiction. This state alienates us into a sense of isolation, where we burn desperately and try to quench the fires with new desires to supplant the old, not knowing they act like oil to feed the flames. Nor does it end when our body dies or volitions or willed actions. All our consequences soldier on - not us somehow - yet somehow connected, like the oldest face, or our own, we are reborn. From the very beginning of our life strangers are implied, they are the ancestors of the flow of unconsciousness which is our mind. Their actions, their consequences have helped to make us and we, with our life in turn, are building the stranger who will come after us. Connected and at the same time not. In Buddhist terms this is the world called Samsara. The deathless state arises in dependence upon wisdom, and wisdom is never present without compassion. Compassion is the expression of wisdom, of the deathless state. From the deathless state a being would look with compassion on our travails, and would try to help us. In this way the Dharma, Buddhism

impinges on the world, this samsara and posits in our structures of our dualistic minds an opposite - the Deathless, Nirvana, Enlightenment. The Buddhist sees Enlightenment as a blessed release from the stream of conditioned things, from processes composed of other processes, an endless combination. Nirvana, the Deathless, occupies a middle position between or above all extreme conceptions of existence or non existence. It casts aside all those views derived from these extremes which wrong our mind. All these different expressions find a home finally in eternalism or nihilism that we will live forever or we will disappear. Phenomena, our lives arise in dependence upon conditions; this thesis is the essence of the teaching, the realization of which constitutes Enlightenment according to Sangharakshita.

There is no mystery; we just misunderstand the structures of our mind. We think we are *things* when we are marvelous processes. We think we are of recent birth when in the stream of our consciousness we have voyaged so long in time that only a Buddha could know. We think we are finite and will die soon, and we will, and yet we won't. We think we are negatively alone and in that sense of separateness we are, but in our depths we touch our unity and rest there in our uniqueness. We think we will never be happy. That's true if happiness is something we draw blood for, either of ourselves or others. We think that we are unreal, when we are *very* real and intrinsically of consequence, we think our lives are meaningless, and they *are* if that is what we think, and *still* are even if we think they are not if in reality we have misunderstood our depths and misinterpreted our potential.

Conclusion

I would like to finish on an image, that's what we used to say ten years ago in the FWBO and people used to stand up and I'd dread it. A guy would say, "I'd like to finish with an image," and I would just imagine half a ton of scrap iron being dragged on to the stage with the guy, and I'd be thinking, "Oh no, not another one of these images." [Audience laughs] "Oh! Clank, boom, bang!" And usually there'd be some poor old bodhisattva, wheeled out to make an ending to their talk. Anyway I've got an image here. It's an image and I've been trying to sort this image out for two years, and I still haven't managed it, but I'll keep going.

When we were children we thought there was only one dawn, one sunset and the wee song we called "our own." Later on we realized that the world turned and there was always a dawn somewhere, always a sunset. It made us think of day and night in endless pursuit like jewels, one dark, one light, that beautified the world. We were happy to know that the sunset and the dawn were always there in stillness, built of movement, witnessed by humanity and because we are of humanity ourselves, witnessed by ourselves. I lost that one.

Then we saw that the sunset and the dawn were concepts, glorious yet partial statements of the truth, it was our *minds* that passed into light and shadow upon the turning world. The light emanated from the same place. Its fall upon our world an amalgam of shadow and light. Two opposites sprung by circumstance from a unity. The turning Earth danced

in our turning mind, creatures on it – we made the shadows and light, but the sun just is. Now we understood that the sun is not only a disc of glory in our sky, it is a sphere. Light pours out from it at all points. Only some falls upon our world, with which we work shaping our shadows and light. Most of our sun's light goes elsewhere to light the universe. Might this not be the same for our mind?

Death and the Buddhist, a matter of humanity. In our minds death chases life chases death chases life in endless reworking of the unifying light, called by the Buddhists our Buddha Nature. Andrew, the poets I didn't read earlier, they are all dead; they are all in the unity of the past, flowers that grow unbidden in our garden for our pleasure. My mother, dead also now in that same unity of the past; rebirthing herself perhaps back into the known life as we speak. Then myself, also dying, and then us all, diverse and unified by our beings, seated here right now beside our very own death and on such good terms as well, in a natural embrace.

We can go anywhere we wish, making our own way as death and a Buddhist makes theirs towards their stated goal, which is Enlightenment, Nirvana, the Deathless. And the Deathless arises in dependence on the Middle Way and the Middle Way arose in dependence on the Buddha. And the Buddha left this world and took his Parinirvana. Thank you.