

Dying To Live

by Vidyamala

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Introduction

I have been asked to give a talk on Spiritual Death – the third great stage of Bhante’s System of Meditation.

We can get a poetic sense of what is meant by spiritual death in Lama Govinda’s poem to Amitabha:

*Give me the strength to burst the sheath of self-hood.
And like the seed that dies in order to be re-born
Let me fearlessly go through the portals of death,
So that I may awaken to the greater life:*

*The all-embracing life of thy love,
The all-embracing love of thy wisdom.*

Essentially, spiritual death is all about letting go – letting go, or going beyond, a fixed sense of self. Letting go into the present moment, investigating our experience in the present moment, and discovering that this experience is constantly changing. It is empty of anything whatsoever that is fixed and unchanging – including a sense of self.

As Bhante said in his original lecture on the system of meditation:

‘Meditation is a bardo, an intermediate state, because when we meditate – in the true sense – we die.

In other words, the subject/object distinction itself must be transcended; the mundane individuality, pure and perfect though it may be, must be broken up. Here the key practice is the recollection of the six elements... involving the giving back of earth, water, fire etc elements in the universe, relinquishing in turn earth, water, fire, air, space, even our individualised consciousness. This is the key practice for breaking up our sense of relative individuality.’

Bhante also mentions other practices that are relevant to this particular stage of spiritual death. E.g. the recollection of impermanence, the recollection of death including the contemplation of the decomposition of the corpse, reflection on the root verses of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, meditation on change, and also the sunyata meditations including the meditation on the nidana chain. But he favours the six element practice as being the most concrete and practical way of practising this particular stage. So, this is the meditative approach that most of us are probably familiar with – specifically linking the stage of spiritual death with the six element practice.

However, in this talk I am going to broaden things out a little. Rather than linking spiritual death with the specific meditation practices mentioned above, I am going to look at what spiritual death means as actual experience and how we can bring this attitude into whatever

meditation practice we are engaged with at any given time. Accordingly this stage of Bhante's system of meditation can be explored in a wide variety of ways and I think there is room for a lot of creativity, inclusivity and flexibility in our approach within the WBO.

In this talk I'll cover the following areas:

- Death and fear
- Death and love
- Spiritual death in different practices

1. Death and Fear

It would be dishonest to give a talk on spiritual death without tackling the closely related topic of fear. Death and fear are two sides of a coin for most of us. Even the words sound similar! It is good to ask ourselves why we are so afraid of death and letting go. I think it is partly the sheer incomprehensibility of it all and it being so thoroughly out of our rational control – be it actual physical death or the moment by moment journey into the void that is at the heart of our spiritual practice. That we will one day all physically die is one of the few certainties in life and yet, paradoxically, the whole business of death is shot through with uncertainty and an encounter with the unknown.

I remember vividly my first encounter with death. I was about 20 and my grandmother had just died aged 94. My father invited me and my twin sister to go into Nanny's bedroom. He wanted us to see her body and to say our good-byes. I am grateful to him for seeing that this would be a good thing for us to do. I have the whole scene embedded in my memory – the smells of her lovely oak-panelled bedroom in her house by the sea; the position I was standing in to the right of her head, looking down at her body and finding it shockingly foreign. How had she become this lifeless shell rather than a real person? I remember the tears streaming down my face as I looked into her, searching for my Nanny and not finding her anywhere. Where had she gone? More urgently, who had she been when she was alive? What had made her my Nanny that bought me pyjamas each year for my birthday, had a lolly jar for the grandchildren on the mantelpiece, and made fantastic sponge cakes? I remember the moment when I decided it was the light in her eyes that had made her my Nanny, and that this light had gone out at her death. This raised another problem: what is the light in the eyes that makes a person who they are? This is one of the questions that got me on the spiritual path and I'm still on a journey of finding the answer.

The other aspect of death that is frightening is the crushing loss that accompanies death. When someone we love dies we not only have to cope with the loss of them as companions in life, but also, by implication, have to cope with knowledge that one day we too will die. This can be overwhelming and terrifying. Also, in facing this fact of loss, we are confronted with the fact that the process of death is not some far off event, but that in truth, according to Buddhism, we are dying all the time. We are impermanent, we have no fixed self. This in turn can lead to the terrible fear and suspicion that 'I' am not real right now. Who am I? What am I? become burning questions that are of course desperately uncomfortable and riddled with insecurity.

So we have arrived at our core spiritual problem: the truth of anicca or impermanence and the truth of annatta, or insubstantiality. If everything is changing then this must, by implication,

include my sense of self. I am therefore empty of anything fixed and unchanging. So, we are back to the question, who am I? How do I make sense of my life? Is this death in life a terrible bleak thing or is it a gateway to freedom? These are very important questions for us to face, but in order to face them we must be willing to accept, even embrace, fear as part of that enquiry.

“Fearlessness” is an interesting word. Obviously it is a quality highly praised in the Buddhist tradition as being crucial to the spiritual life. But what does it mean? Does it mean an absence of fear? (as I used to think, which meant I felt I was constantly failing every time I experienced fear), or does it mean more an ability to face fear, to meet it, without reaction? I am increasingly thinking it is the latter. After all fear is going to be so fundamental to our experience as we face up to the truth of anicca and annatta. It will be with us all the way to Enlightenment I should think. Remember that the higher fetters include conceit and ignorance. One must surely still have traces of fear when under the sway of these fetters. So, I think this great quality of fearlessness could also be described as courage in the face of fear and an ability to stand firm, to not react with aversion. To be with fear in the face of impermanence so one can truly live. Pema Chodron says that being afraid of death is being afraid of life, which is worth reflecting on. If we aren’t willing to be present to the truth of the flux of the moment, we will continually find ways to avoid being present at all. If we don’t face the fear of death and impermanence with a willingness to experience it, we will never be fully alive. Akasasuri told me recently that her friend Vajrayogini had a phrase she used within her work as a therapist: ‘If you die before you die, you won’t die when you die’!

When we are unwilling or unable to stay with the truth of anicca or annata we tend to be propelled into eternalism, nihilism, the past or the future. When we think about it we can see how all these habitual reactions are ways of avoiding being with the naked truth of whatever we are experiencing in the moment. They help us stay asleep in the illusion of security and the pretence that life is under control and that we can cheat the lord of death. They are like the blind fold that prevents us facing what is staring us in the face.

When under the sway of eternalism we bargain with life and turn our spiritual practice into some kind of insurance policy. One is motivated by a personal agenda: if I meditate well, then I’ll reap good karma and avoid suffering. It is the view of the optimist who fundamentally follows the spiritual life to strike some kind of deal with reality that will lead to protection from harm, albeit often on very subtle levels. It is the view of the person who lives under the tyranny of hope as a refuge. Always straining towards some future outcome and avoiding the experience in the moment. It leads to a lot of mental and physical strain and tension in my experience. (I have a tendency to eternalism by nature).

At the other extreme is nihilism, which we are probably also familiar with. This is more pessimistic and hope-less. If everything is changing and I’m just going to die one day then what is the point in bothering to embrace life. If I am dying right now then what is the point. It can seem as if everything we touch turns to dust as it is empty of any security and this becomes very life-denying and bleak. Taken to extremes it can include the sense I mentioned earlier where one can start to doubt one’s existence at all. Maybe I am just making myself up? This can be extremely destabilising and scary but is essentially a view that is not grounded in the reality of the moment. If one gets out of one’s head and moves towards experience then of course there are things to rest one’s relative sense of self upon: the sensations of the breath, the moment by moment thoughts, feelings and sensations. One needs to remember that annatta does not mean that one doesn’t exist at all, rather that one doesn’t

have any fixed and unchanging existence. I often use the phrase ‘all things are full of emptiness’ to counter my own wrong views that are nihilistic.

Apart from eternalism and nihilism we of course have a multitude of other strategies to avoid facing spiritual death, and the truth of the insubstantiality of our own nature, in this moment. We fantasise about the future where things will be nice and secure; we agonise about failings or ‘if only’s’ from the past. We buy lots of nice things to make us feel more substantial and important or try to turn the pleasures of life into a safe refuge. We tell endless stories about ourselves to ourselves (and to anyone else that will listen)! We try to make sense of life on its own level without having the courage to peer downwards and discover that our feet are standing in space. The mundane is inherently insecure.

So, how do we gradually learn to face the truth of spiritual death in the here and now? How do we pull ourselves away from these incredibly seductive worlds of views, fantasies and self-immortalising?

Personally, I think the key to it all is staying with actual experience. Not ideas about our experience but the constant ebbing and flowing of sensation, feeling and thoughts in the moment. As Vessantara says in relation to the wisdom of Akshobya: ‘Reality is our experience with no ideas added on’ which I find a brilliant phrase and reminder. We can let go towards experience, as it is, with neither grasping nor aversion and be thoroughly grounded in our experience. On that basis, we can begin to see into the impermanent, insubstantial and unsatisfactory nature of things – rising and falling like waves on the ocean. Not as things to cling onto, or things to deny, just as experience and an expression of reality.

Crucially, in the context of the spiritual life, it is in meditation that we get an un-paralleled opportunity to train ourselves to do this sort of enquiry; to die into the present moment. In a sense meditation provides us with a laboratory within which to investigate our experience on a moment by moment basis. We reduce distractions from the senses by closing the eyes and being in a quiet place. We stay still and we create the conditions where we can simply be with our experience in a naked and un-distracted way. When conducting this kind of investigation I personally find it most helpful to think in terms of ‘letting go’ but others may find it more helpful to think in terms of ‘being present’. We let go into the experience of the moment, or are present to that experience, and allow it to continually come into being and pass away

The Peace of Mind Project

This approach to meditation is what Osadhi and I are doing in our work in the Peace of Mind project in Manchester, about which I want to tell you now. This is a seven week programme where we teach relaxation, meditation and awareness strategies for daily life to help people with chronic pain and/or ill health to help them manage their conditions. Everything we do on our courses is orientated around being more aware of the present moment and learning to ‘respond not react’ to what one discovers there. In other words it is all about trying to be totally present to experience in the ways I have just described and realising that there is always choice. So many of us ricochet through life reacting blindly to stimulus and this is certainly true for many people whose lives contain a lot of unpleasant physical sensations due to illness or pain. One could think this would be a difficult, or highly reactive, group of people to work with. However, I have found the opposite to be true. By the time people get to

the point of booking themselves on a meditation course to help them deal with pain they are usually tired of running away. They have seen, at least to some extent, the futility of trying to avoid the very experience that is so dominating their lives. They are also an extremely courageous and highly motivated group of people who are willing to turn around and look the demon in the eye and try to make peace with their experience. Inevitably, spiritual death is a large part of their path – both in terms of losses and also potential liberation when they are freed from the prison of past and future. For people to do well with meditation they need to have let go of hankering after their old selves. We put it quite bluntly when talking to them; the option of turning the clock back to their pre-accident, pre-illness self simply does not exist. This means they have two options: One, to be in pain and be miserable and two, to be in pain with a sense of initiative in their lives. Put another way: Pain is inevitable, misery is a choice! Of course this isn't easy to hear and as we all know letting go often involves grief and sadness but it is the only way to move forward honestly. Recently at a continuation drop-in class we had a brief discussion about why people keep meditating even though it means sitting with so much that is unpleasant, and they were all unanimous in talking about the relief of no longer running away. They may not have found happiness in any simple sense, but they have found contentment, peace and a deep sense of authenticity – all qualities that in their own ways are priceless.

The wonderful thing about 'dying' into the moment is that our experience can then be so much broader and richer. There is a Zen Buddhist in America called Darlene Cohen who has rheumatoid arthritis and she has written about the twin poles of working with pain (I think these principles apply to any dukkha be it mental, emotional or physical). One pole is to acknowledge pain and the fact of its burden on us, which means being with it in the present moment as honestly as one can. The other pole is to enrich life so pain can no longer commandeer it. By this she means broadening out our experience of the present moment so that rather than pain being one of ten things you are aware of in the moment you make it one of a hundred things. We all have unpleasant aspects to our experiences but if we are sensitive there will also be a multitude of tender, pleasurable dimensions to the moment as well. For example the sun on the skin, feeling love for a friend, the brush of hair against your skin, the gentle sensations of the breath and even simple things like having enough food in one's stomach. If we live our lives like this then it can become a succession of rich, multidimensional, sensitive moments where we are less reactive to likes, dislikes, pleasure, pain and so on. This is where spiritual death becomes liberating. When we die to our old identities, our old selves from the past and let go of our fantasies and hopes for the future we can come to rest in the present moment. Then we discover the richness and texture of now and now and now which is always changing and capable of being changed through our actions and choices. This is indeed the path to liberation.

2. Death and Love

Seeing into the truth of interconnectedness is another fascinating and important aspect of letting go into the present moment and seeing into impermanence. If everything is changing, then this means the boundaries between things must, by implication, be more porous and insubstantial than we usually realise. It is worth remembering that the vimoksa-mukha or gateway to liberation when one sees through impermanence is the animitta – the imageless or signless. This suggests that there is no fixed and unchanging 'image' to cling onto when one sees things as they really are. In other words, if we have no fixed self, then this means that any sense of absolute separation from 'other' by implication ceases. We are thus interconnected. What does this mean? Sometimes one can think that the truth of

interconnectedness implies some kind of bland merging into a sort of soupy sameness. There is a piece in Know Your Mind where Bhante gives a very helpful description of how to get more of a practical sense of what is meant:

'If one thinks of matter in terms of energy...the whole universe can be considered as consisting of life or energy that coagulates into more or less separate forms of conscious life. It is as if the whole of life is a stream within which more concentrated currents flow. So in building up a mental picture of the universe we should think neither in terms of mutually exclusive interlocking parts, nor of a sort of undifferentiated mass; the reality is somewhere in between. We are separate from each other and from the world, but there isn't a hard and fast distinction between us. What I think of as me and what you think of as you is in each case the centre of a particular coagulation of the common stream of life. It is difficult to tell where 'I' come to an end and where 'you' begin. We shade into each other.'

'Know your Mind', pp.90-91

He also says:

'When you attain Enlightenment... you no longer have a will that is separate from that of others... You don't experience another person as a sort of brick wall you are coming up against, and you no longer experience yourself as a separate and conflicting solid force. You experience others in a completely different way: they become diaphanous or transparent, because your will is not coming into collision with theirs. This completely different, more relaxed, lighter, freer attitude taken to the nth degree, is something of the nature of Enlightenment. The world is the same but you see it differently.'

'Know Your Mind', p.53

So, hopefully I have established here a clear link between spiritual death, letting go of identifying with a fixed sense of self, and love. It is not an immediately obvious connection, but is worth reflecting on. I bring this aspect into my Amitabha sadhana very directly. I have a phrase that I say to myself during the practise that invariably softens my heart; "We are not separate so the only response is to love". I quite systematically track through the relationship between impermanence, interconnectedness and love. Over the years the connection has become much more intuitively obvious and at my fingertips. Initially I had to sort of figure it out when I reflected – now the connection between death/letting go and love/interconnectedness is much more instinctual. I have used my Amitabha connection as a training ground to loosen up and increase the pliancy of my heart. In my meditation, I often get an image of myself and others being like waves on the ocean. As I breathe in and out, I get a sense of us all coming into being and passing away just like waves. There is a gentle, constant, ebbing and flowing of form in harmony with the movement of the breath. It is very harmonising and beautiful and helps me get a sense of our separate, yet temporary, forms rising and falling from the vastness, or 'big mind' of the ocean.

'If you cast a pebble into the quiet ocean, the ripples extend in all directions and finally melt into the ocean. This is really human life. So, from this vantage point, whatever kind of ripples you can see – suffering, up and down waves – whatever kinds

of things come up, remember they are happening in the vastness of the ocean, and sooner or later they melt back into the immense ocean.'

by Dainin Katagiri in 'Returning to Silence'

As well as reflecting on the image of the waves and the ocean to try to get a sense of interconnectedness, I also use related questions such as; “why is compassion an expression of wisdom?” “What is the loving aspect of the unconditioned?” All these approaches and reflections help alleviate any tendency one may have to seeing spiritual death in a cold, dry way. They bring in a warm, loving, very heart based aspect of practice – which is essential when contemplating or dwelling on impermanence or death.

They help us remember that death is never an end in Buddhism, it is just a marker for change. Death and rebirth are two sides of the same coin. Even the ultimate ‘death’ of Enlightenment is not to be mistaken simply as an ending eg Bhante has described Enlightenment as a state of irreversible creativity. One could say we die *from* narrow ego hood *to* freedom, as beautifully described in Govinda's poem that I read at the start of this talk;

*“Let me fearlessly go through the portals of death
So that I may awaken to the greater life.”*

This points the tremendous richness that one can experience when living more in harmony with the beauty and liberation of change. It is a deeply creative and wise person who is able to be fully aware, fully present in the moment and yet at the same time open to death, to emptiness. We will have a rich life if we can engage wholeheartedly, mindfully and passionately with whatever this moment contains whilst at the same time letting the whole experience slip through the fingers without grasping.

3. Spiritual Death in Different Practices

The idea of going beyond identifying with a fixed sense of self and moving towards spiritual death underlies all Buddhist meditation. I believe we can include this sort of exploration within any of the meditation practices taught within the FWBO.

Mindfulness of Breathing

In the Mindfulness of Breathing we can be aware of the three laksanas in relation to the breath. The breath is a fantastic object of mindfulness in this respect. It is always present as a felt sensation and so it is inherently grounding and real, and yet it is always changing. There is a lot of scope for investigating the breath in this way. We can also ask ourselves ‘who is breathing?’ as a way of beginning to break down the artificial separation between breath as experience, and the breather.

*‘If you think “I breath”,
the “I” is extra.
There is no you to say “I”.
What we call “I” is just a swinging door
Which moves when we inhale
And when we exhale.
It just moves, that is all.’*

D.T. Suzuki in 'Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind'

We can explore any element of control within the act of breathing and practice letting go very fully into the breath. I find a good way to explore this edge is to 'let the breath breathe itself'.

Metta Bhavana (and Brahma Viharas)

In the Metta Bhavana we have a lot of scope to explore and see through the false separation between self and other. If we ask 'Who am I?' we can also ask 'Who are you?' of the other people we include in the practice. We can see how both self and other are empty of a fixed and unchanging self and, in that sense, are not ultimately separate or isolated. The quality of metta, by its nature, includes an 'opening' or 'releasing' of the heart, which can help us loosen up our sense of self and generally become more pliant, flexible and mentally and emotionally creative. I think the Metta bhavana is a good context to reflect on spiritual death if one has a tendency to a sort of cold, alienated nihilism. One can reflect on interconnectedness, loving others as much as self, as a way of seeing through attachment to a fixed, unchanging, isolated sense of self. We can exchange self and other, reflecting on how "you are dear to yourself, as I am dear to myself. What might it be like to be you etc". So, one can explore all these aspects of the self/other conundrum within the metta bhavana and in this way it can be a very effective vipashyana bhavana practice.

Six Element Practice

This is an excellent practise for training oneself to loosen the mind and its identification with the elements and the senses. As I've already said it is the main practise Bhante recommends for overcoming pride and the wrong view that one has a fixed and permanent self.

Before major surgery last year I systematically embarked on this kind of training as preparation. I did the six element practise most days for several months where I concentrated particularly on letting go of identifying strongly with the elements as being exclusively 'mine'. I reflected a lot on how all the experiences of resistance both internally and externally are the earth element, both in me and the world. Likewise how experiences of movement and fluidity are the water element. When I contemplated the air element I reflected on how the wind in the trees is no different from the air in the forest of my body. In the consciousness element I simply tried to loosen my identification with whatever my mind was getting up to.

I find it evocative to think of one of those hanging tapestries that you see in country estates. They cover a whole wall and depict a coherent image from a distance. Close up you can see how the image is made of millions of interwoven coloured threads. Between each thread there is a tiny space. In my meditation I try to rest in the space between the threads of the thoughts that make up the story, or tapestry of my life. There is often a tangible sense of 'teasing apart' the dense weave of 'me-ness' and coming to rest in a much more fluid experience of mind. In doing this sort of meditation I wanted to try to develop some positive habits of opening out towards my experience in a receptive and non clinging way, rather than habitually tightening or hardening against it. I guessed this would stand me in good stead when I was in pain and not able to meditate for the period after the surgery. I would say that, on the whole, it did help and I was mostly quite positive and mentally and emotionally quite pliant and fluid. What was particularly striking was a period of about two days when I completely lost this perspective. It was like I suddenly went from being in a relatively open space mentally, to a tiny cramped prison cell. Very little had changed except my mental states

that indeed proves the words of the Buddha in the Dhammapada: *“the world is the creation of the mind”!*

Interestingly it was being overwhelmed by fear at my deteriorating physical condition from an infection that caused the tightening of my mind. I suppose it was fear of death at root as I felt myself slipping towards some kind of porous edge between worlds. I got myself out of this mind created hell realm through recognising what had happened and apologising for my negativity, as well as my physical condition stabilising with antibiotics. This allowed the doors of my mind to open again. Really it was the shocking contrast that showed me how useful the six element practise had been and how, generally, my experience during that time was relatively spacious and real. My main practice had been trying to stay with what the moment contained in a straight forward and human way. I do believe the six element practise was a major factor in this facility and have continued to do it regularly ever since.

Visualisation sadhana

I am referring here to the form of sadhana many of us received at ordination drawing on visualisation from the Tibetan tradition. Obviously there is a strong and overt sunyata element to these practices in that the visualised archetypal form arises out of the blue sky and then merges back into it at the end of the practice. This is a very helpful way of using the imaginal faculty to reinforce the notion that a fixed and unchanging self is an illusion. We see that the deity – and by implication oneself and others – are empty. In this practice we ‘see’ the form of the deity, but then it fades away into an echo and a dream. This meditation ‘practice’ helps us develop the ability to relate to all ‘forms’ in the world – oneself and others in a looser, more creative way. Relating to the relative form of things, whilst at the same time seeing into their inherent emptiness.

These are the main practices that Bhante outlined in his original system of meditation. In addition there are now many Order members developing an interest in what has been called Pure Awareness meditation whereby the mind is neither directed nor allowed to wander off. One tries to be fully present to experience of sensations, emotions, and thoughts as they arise and pass away, but without getting caught up in them. This type of meditation is, as far as I can see, what happens when we are practising ‘letting go’, allowing the conditions that fix the self to die away. One is left in a state of awareness. Certainly one can develop a sensitivity to spiritual death in this practice, indeed it seems to be the main orientation of the practice.

In addition one can apply the same principles of Vipashyana Bhavana to all the other practices one may encounter in the Order: the Mula Yogas, walking meditation, GFR and Prostration Practice etc.

Conclusion

I have now investigated in a number of ways how the seam of spiritual death runs through our spiritual lives and meditation practice. I have looked at the understandable fear we may feel when facing death and how we can react to this by retreating into nihilism, eternalism, the past or the future. I have talked about how I encourage people in pain or who are ill to see the present moment as a moment of freedom; there is just this moment and it contains a wealth of experience – both pleasant and unpleasant when we release ourselves from the tyranny of past and future and die into the moment. I have looked at the connection between death and love. One could say that we need to die from narrow ego-hood, if we are to truly

love. Finally I have looked at how we can bring an attitude of spiritual death to any meditation practice we are engaged with.

I believe the system of meditation we have in the WBO is very rich and contains infinite scope for exploring spiritual death. But, in my experience it does take time to work out how to apply oneself to the different practices in a helpful way. It seems, in the end, to come down to confidence. Having the confidence to be creative and flexible without becoming too woolly and vague. I have found it important to regularly review my practise and reassess it and make changes that keep it alive and interesting.

A couple of years ago I had the opportunity to go on a retreat with Jon Kabat-Zinn, who practises vipassana as taught at the Insight Meditation Society in the USA. He taught meditation whereby one had different objects of concentration at different times; breath, sensations, feelings/emotions, thoughts or choiceless awareness. With each of the awareness methods one watches the object of concentration coming and going and investigates its true nature. The whole approach is every much one of non-striving, non-doing, just resting in 'being' and the moment. I made an interesting discovery by the end of the retreat; I was much more relaxed and less tired than I usually am after doing intensive meditation. This showed me that I had developed habits over the years of trying too hard in more overtly 'bhavana' practises. I used this very helpful discovery as an opportunity to bring a more gentle, hands off, letting go approach into my meditation. I could see it wasn't the methods that were the problem it was my approach.

Over the subsequent two years I have explored a lot this dynamic between more 'active' or overtly bhavana practises and more 'receptive' non doing approaches. One can also describe these as the two approaches of transcendence and immanence. I find both to be necessary at different times and even within one sit. My meditation practise has become a lot richer and more open without becoming sloppy. I am grateful for the structures of the practises I have been taught in the WBO and am grateful for the confidence to rest within the structures and to constantly try to be present, with honesty to my experience in each moment. I have reflected that if I had encountered only the IMS system, or only Zen (both of which I am drawn to) then I would never have been initiated into Amitabha which is an essential element in my meditation practise. Indeed, I do consider my connection with Amitabha to be one of the great blessings of my ordination.

So I have everything I need. Really it is just up to me to apply myself to the great task of meditation, in each moment of life, with a spirit of openness, receptivity and enquiry. To understand that I need to die in order to live. To die into life. To die into the moment in all its fullness, complexity, mystery and wonder. To pass through the portals of death so I may awaken to the greater life.

I would like to finish with a poem by Kathleen Raine.

The Moment

*To write down all I contain at this moment
I would pour the desert through an hour-glass,
The sea through a water-clock,
Grain by grain and drop by drop
Let in the trackless, measureless, mutable seas and sands.*

*For earth's days and nights are breaking over me
The tides and sands are running through me,
And I have only two hands and a heart to hold the desert and the sea.*

*What can I contain of it? It escapes and eludes me
The tides wash me away
The desert shifts under me.*