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# **When We Die**

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## **Buddhism in Every Step 7**

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## When We Die

Death is not an easy subject. If I were to tell you that there is much suffering after death, you might be fearful of the pain you have to endure after death. In such a mindset, you would not be able to comprehend the true nature of death. If I were to tell you that life after death is serene and peaceful, you might misunderstand me and think that death is wonderful and is a means of liberation. Therefore, I can only say this: “Life is not necessarily joyous, and death is not necessarily miserable.”

Once, there was a rich man who had a son in the later years of his life. When the boy was born, the house was filled with guests who came to congratulate the new father. Among the guests was a Chan master who was completely unmoved by the festivities around him. Before long, he started to cry. The rich man was puzzled and asked, “Master, is

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there anything wrong? Why are you so sad?" The Chan master replied despondently, "I cry because you have added another person to the ranks of death in your family."

An enlightened person sees birth as an extension of life, and death as the start of another life. Birth is not just about living, and death is not just about dying. When we look at birth and death as one, what is there to rejoice about or grieve over?

When Chinese people see someone who is one hundred years old, they often congratulate him by saying, "May you live to be one hundred and twenty." Let us think about this for a moment: Is the occasion of someone reaching the age of one hundred and twenty really cause for celebration? If a man were to live to be one hundred and twenty, his one hundred year old son might become sick one day and pass away. One after another, his eighty-year-old grandchild and his sixty-year-old great-grandchild might also pass away. This old man will no longer be able to enjoy the happiness of spending time with his descendents. As he lives through the deaths of his children and grandchildren, he is left all alone. In a person's life, there is nothing harder to bear than the death of one's child. So, longevity does not necessarily equal happiness. Often, with longevity come loneliness, helplessness, and physical infirmity.

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Just as we should not be obsessed with longevity, we should also not fear death. The mere mention of death often provokes many frightful images in people's minds. In Chinese culture, many people worry that they will be punished after they die—that they will have to climb mountains of knives or drown in pots of boiling oil. If we really understood death, we would see that dying is not unlike getting a passport that allows us to travel to another country. How liberating that would be! Death is a path that we all must travel. How can we face death in such a way that we feel prepared and not overwhelmed? To do this, we must understand death, the nature of which is discussed in the following four sections.

## **I. The Moment of Death to the State of Death**

Though we all have lived and died through countless rebirths, none of us can recall the exact experience of death. We do not know what death is really like. According to the sutras, when we die, we are still fully cognizant of all that is going on around us. We may hear the calm voice of the doctor announcing our death or the sound of family members grieving. We may still be able to see people gathering around our body, trying to move our body that is now bereft of the signs of life. We may still worry about the many things left incomplete. We may feel ourselves moving among our family and

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friends, wanting to tell them what they should do. However, everybody is overcome with grief, and no one can see or hear us.

In the *Reader's Digest*, there was once an article about one man's near-death experience. One day while he was driving, he had a severe accident; the car was totally demolished, and he was on the brink of death. When the ambulance, paramedics, police, and his family arrived on the scene, his consciousness had already left his body, and he felt himself floating in the air. He could hear over the din a group of people arguing about how the accident happened, so he went over to the police officer and tried to tell him what had actually happened. But the officer could neither hear nor see him. None of the others took notice of his presence nor could they see him. At this time, he had only his consciousness and was no longer in possession of his body. He finally became aware that he was floating outside of his body, looking at it like an onlooker. He then found himself passing at incredible speed through a long, dark, and narrow tunnel.

In another case, a person spoke of his own near-death experience when he suffered a severe head injury and was brought back from the brink of death. He said, "I remember my head went 'bam,' and I lost consciousness. Afterward, I just felt warm, comfortable, and at peace." This is because once

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one's consciousness leaves the body, it is no longer constrained and can therefore feel a level of comfort and serenity never before experienced. More cases abound. One person also had this to say about his near-death experience: "When I was dying, I had an extremely good, wonderful, and peaceful sensation." Another man described his experience this way: "I felt light as a feather. I was flying freely toward a world of brightness!" As we can see, death is not as chilling and ghastly as we may have imagined.

In the sutras, it is written that our life in this world is cumbersome, not like a tortoise that is weighed down by its heavy shell. When we die, we are able to rid ourselves of this burden and transcend an existence that has been confined by the limits of our physical body. However, when we are faced with death, most of us still try to hold on to the worldly emotions and the sensual desires. We are also unable to let go of our sons, daughters, grandchildren, or our wealth. We do not want to die and cannot accept death gracefully. We think of dying as a painful experience, like tearing the shell off of a living tortoise. Buddhism does not share this view of dying. Buddhism teaches us that when we die, we are liberated from this body, and we feel extremely free and easy. It is like the relief of putting down a heavy piece of baggage. How light and carefree it is!

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Whether we are smart or slow, good or bad, we all have to face death. Death is not a question of *if*, but a question of *how* and *when*. Even a powerful ruler like the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty, who was able to unite the whole of China, could not find any means to prolong his life. All beings that live must, without exception, also die. The difference lies only in the circumstances of death. The sutras divide the circumstances of death into four categories.

A. *Death Upon Exhaustion of One's Life Span*

This is what we call dying of old age. It is like a flickering flame that dies out naturally when its supply of oil is exhausted. We would all like to live a nice long life, but a human life span has its limits. Life continues only with each breath we take, but as soon as we stop breathing, we die and return to the soil. There is a saying which goes like this: "Some only live from dawn till dusk. Others are born in spring or summer, and die in autumn or winter. Some live for ten, a hundred, or even a thousand years. Whether we live for a short time or a long time, is there really all that much difference?" What this says is that our life span is limited, and no one can escape this reality.

B. *Death Upon Exhaustion of One's Merits*

It is said in the sutras, "Humans do not understand life and death; human eyes do not discern [karmic]

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merits and demerits.” Life is like an air bubble on the surface of water; when the air inside the bubble dissipates, the bubble will no longer exist. After a rich man squanders his wealth, he becomes poor. Similarly, when we have exhausted our merits, death will come knocking on our doors.

### *C. Death Caused by Accidents*

This is what we call “premature death,” which means that one dies when one is not yet supposed to. One may be killed in a car accident, ambushed in a war, murdered by an enemy, or attacked by a wild beast; such deaths are sudden and unexpected. There is a Chinese proverb that is a fitting description of this kind of sudden death. It states: “As long as one continues to breathe, possibilities abound. When death comes around, all comes to a standstill.”

### *D. Death at Will*

The three circumstances of death described above are unpredictable and uncontrollable. On the contrary, death at will is without uncertainty and can be planned. In Buddhism, this is often referred to as “living and dying at will,” and there are many great Buddhist masters and sages who can be born and can die at will. They are not controlled by the cycle of birth and death for they are completely in tune with causes and conditions. Venerable Master

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Daoan of the East Jin dynasty is a perfect example of such a master. He was in full control of his own passing. On February 8th of the 20th year of the Jianyuan era, he assembled his disciples in the great hall of Wuzhong Temple in Changan. After praying and paying respect to the Buddha, he calmly told his disciples, “I’m going to leave now! All of you should continue to spread the Dharma and wake the ignorant from their delusions.”

Everyone was shocked and pleaded with the Master, “Teacher, you’re in such good health. You should stay and continue the work of the Buddha. How can you stop here and leave us now? It’s time for lunch; please have lunch first.”

Master Daoan answered, “Good, I’ll have some lunch.” Having said this, he ate his meal as usual. After lunch, he retired to his room to rest and passed away while resting. Venerable Master Daoan died at will, completely free of pain and suffering. If we practice the Dharma diligently and become liberated from the cycle of birth and death, we, too, can attain enlightenment and enter nirvana.

Now that we have discussed the circumstances of death, let us turn our focus to another aspect of death. What are the sensations of dying? The sutras tell us of three sensations experienced in death. They are:

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### 1. The imbalance of the great earth element<sup>1</sup>

When a person dies of an illness of the body or bones, at the very moment of death, the whole body may feel like a massive piece of land sinking into the ocean. As it gradually sinks and is buried, the person feels suffocating pressure. The sensation associated with this form of death is described as “the great earth element being submerged under the great water element.”

### 2. The imbalance of the great water element

When a person dies of a circulatory disease, he or she initially has a sensation of being submerged in water, and feels both wet and cold. This later gives way to a burning sensation, and the person will feel extremely hot. The sensation associated with this form of death is described as “the great water element being engulfed by the great fire element.”

### 3. The imbalance of the great fire element

When one dies of a pulmonary disease, he/she feels a burning sensation, like a wildfire blazing at dusk. The body then feels a searing pain as if being blown into pieces by strong gusts and scattered about like ashes. The sensation associated with this

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1. In Buddhism, we believe that the body is made up of the four great elements of earth, water, fire, and wind.

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form of death is described as “the great fire element being overwhelmed by the great wind element.”

What is it like *immediately* after death and before our next rebirth. The sutras tell us that because our bodies are transformed from a finite and bounded form to a limitless and formless state when we die, the way we feel immediately following death is not all negative. This may seem somewhat surprising, but there are three good reasons to explain this.

1. The limits of time and space

When we are alive, we are limited by time and space. We cannot travel simply by willing ourselves, and we cannot reverse the aging process that comes with the passage of time. Upon death, and before our next rebirth, we are liberated from the constraints of the body, and our true nature can move freely between the three realms.

2. The burden of the body

It is said in the *Dharmapada*, “The physical body is the cause of all suffering on earth. The sufferings of thirst and hunger; hot and cold; anger and fear; lust, desires, hatred, and tragedy—all of these stem from the existence of the body.” While we are alive, we spend a lot of time taking care of our physical body. When hungry, we have to eat; when cold,

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we have to put on more clothing; and when ill, we have to endure the pain. This body of ours brings us far more affliction than happiness. If we pause for a moment and take stock, we will notice that a lot of our concerns pertain to our body. However, after we die, our consciousness is no longer subjected to the confines of the body and all problems associated with the physical body vanish with it. There is no more hunger or sickness; a huge burden is lifted from our shoulders.

### 3. The supernatural element

While we are alive, our faculties are restricted by the limitations of our body. After death, we are no longer bound by the laws of physics. We are able to see things that are undetectable to the human eye and hear sounds that cannot be heard by the human ear. We are able to float freely in the air since the force of gravity no longer applies to us. In this state, walls cannot stop us, and we can travel simply by willing it.

Death is not an end; it is not a finale. On the contrary, it is the beginning of a new state of existence. When we die, the physical body ceases to function, but the consciousness lives on. In the time after one's death and before the next rebirth, the consciousness is in a state referred to in Buddhism

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as the “intermediate state of becoming.” Depending on the cumulative karma from one’s previous lives, a being in the intermediate state of becoming will be reborn into one of the six realms of existence. Once reborn, we forget all our memories of previous lives. This is called “confusion in-between lives.” Because of this, we cannot recall any sufferings of our previous lives in this present life. Furthermore, when we are reborn in our next life, we will forget the worries of this present life. A poem written by Emperor Shunzhi says it well: “Before I was born, who was I? At the moment of my birth, who am I? If this grown man is me, then who will I be after death?”

Actually, it is not important for us to know our past or future lives. We learn from the Dharma that *one* never truly dies; what dies is the physical body, a combination of the four great elements. Though the physical body dies, the consciousness continues on without interruption. When we realize that the physical body is like a water bubble, as well as the illusiveness of the world around us, then we can accept death without reservation.

## **II. Judgment after Death and the Next Rebirth**

We often think of the departed, wondering about the kind of situation they might be in. In Chinese Buddhist culture, it is customary to pray for the

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dead when we celebrate the New Year or various other holidays. This is all very well if it is done out of concern and respect for departed parents or loved ones. Most people, however, have the misconception that their parents become ghosts in hell when they pass away. Hoping that their parents will rest in peace, children often have prayer services for their deceased parents. This kind of thinking is actually quite disrespectful to our parents because only those who have committed grave transgressions will be reborn as hungry ghosts or hellish beings. Does this mean we think of our parents as less than virtuous? Why do we not think, instead, that our parents have gone to the heavenly realm, or that they are reborn in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss?

All over the world, many religions believe that when we die, we are all first judged on how we have led our lives. Chinese folk religion believes that after one's death, one appears before King Yama who will mete out judgment. Christians believe that when they die, they come before God who decides if they will be welcomed into heaven or condemned to hell. Buddhists believe in judgment after death as well. The difference is that we are judged, not so much by the Buddha, bodhisattvas, or King Yama, but by our own karma. The cumulative wholesome and unwholesome karma of our past actions will determine the realm of existence we will be reborn

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into and the conditions in which we will be reborn. In Buddhism, our happiness and misery are not controlled by deities, but are in our very own hands.

Where does one go after death? Some people believe that death is the final chapter of one's life and there is nothing afterwards, let alone rebirth. To these people, life is short and fragile. Because of this perspective of death, they view life with skepticism and fear, instead of appreciating and treasuring it. And since they believe they will have nothing after death, there are those who only know how to indulge in pleasure while they are alive. Some are willing to do anything, murder and robbery included, to further their own personal goals. Such a concept of life, which denies the Law of Cause and Effect, is superficial and frightening, and is a *wrong view*. Although Christians differ from Buddhists in their view on how judgment is meted out, they do believe in the existence of heaven and hell and life after death. In Buddhism, we believe that after we die, we will be reborn in one of the six realms of existence. In fact, there is a verse that can help living relatives of the deceased assess the realm into which their loved ones will be reborn. It states, "The enlightened will emerge from the head, and heavenly beings will rise to the heavenly realm through the eyes. Humans emerge from the heart

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and hungry ghosts from the belly. Animals depart from the knees and hellish beings from the feet.” This verse explains that the last part of the body to remain warm indicates the realm into which the deceased will be reborn. When a person dies, if the feet are the first place on his body to go cold and the head is the last place that remains warm, the deceased has attained the fruit of enlightenment. If the eyes are the last body part to remain warm, this means that the consciousness has left through the eyes to be reborn in the heavenly realms. If the heart is the last body part to remain warm, the deceased will be reborn as a human. If the belly stays warm the longest, the deceased has fallen into the hungry ghost realm. If the knees retain warmth the longest, the deceased will be reborn as an animal. If the feet are warm to the very end, the deceased has fallen into hell.

Which realm of existence will we be reborn into? How is this decided? This all depends on the cumulative wholesome and unwholesome karma of our past actions. A saying reminds us: “If you want to know about your future life, all you have to do is reflect upon your present life.” There are three kinds of karmic forces, which determine the realm and the conditions of our next rebirth. These karmic forces are shaped by:

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## 1. The relative weight of our karma

The way this karmic force works can be likened to the way a bank auditor goes through the accounts of customers; those who owe the most money must be pursued first. After a person dies, the relative weight of the wholesome and unwholesome karma will determine the destination of his or her rebirth. A person who has performed many wholesome deeds will be reborn into the three upper realms, while someone with a lot of unwholesome karma will be reborn in one of the three lower realms. The principle behind this is simple: “Good begets good; ill begets ill.”

## 2. Our habits

In Buddhism, we believe that a person’s habits can affect his or her rebirth. For instance, someone may be in the habit of chanting Amitabha Buddha’s name. Should this person be in a fatal accident, and the name of Amitabha Buddha arises clearly in the mind at the moment of death, then with this single-minded focus, he can be reborn into the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.

## 3. Our thoughts

A person’s rebirth is closely linked to his or her daily thoughts. If a person is dedicated to the ways

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of the Buddha, then he or she will be reborn in a pure land. If a person really wants to enter into heaven and practices accordingly, the person will be reborn in the heavenly realm. Thus, in our daily practice, how we continuously maintain mindfulness is the key.

Whether it is the weight of our karma, the force of our habits, or the power of our thoughts that leads us to our next rebirth, we should always think the right thought, practice wholesome deeds, and avoid inflicting harm. This way, we need not fear judgment or death.

### **III. Burial Customs and the Way to Look at Death**

Every culture has its own burial customs and own way of tending to the body of the dead. Some of these different ways of preserving the body include freezing, dehydration, dissection, or mummification. Some bury their dead in the ground while others cremate them. Still others practice burials at sea, and some actually observe open burials.

The way Buddhists tend to their dead is very similar to some of the above-mentioned practices, with two major distinctions. First, Buddhists favor the practice of not moving the body until eight hours after death. Second, Buddhists recommend that we not cry loudly next to the body, lest our cries disturb the dead.

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Why should we not move the body until eight hours after death? Actually, there is a scientific basis for this Buddhist custom. After the lungs have stopped breathing and the heart has stopped beating, the nervous system may still continue to function. Also, some awareness may still remain in a person's subconscious. Though a person may be *clinically* dead, he is not yet *completely* dead. Therefore, when someone passes away, we should not move him in any way regardless of whether the person is sitting, lying down, or half-reclining on the bed. If we try to move the body, we may be causing discomfort to the deceased, who might be resentful and angry. Since the state of mind of the deceased can influence his or her rebirth, it is recommended that the body not be moved for eight hours after death.

In Buddhist literature, there is a story describing how disturbing the body of the dead can lead to some unintended and sometimes unfortunate consequences. There was once a devout Buddhist king who passed away. The royal family gathered around the body and held vigil. It so happened that a mosquito landed on the king's nose. One member of the royal family tried to shoo the mosquito away, but missed, instead slapping the king. The king was very annoyed and anger arose within him, causing him to be reborn as a python.

There is another reason why we should wait eight hours before moving the body of the dead. It is

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possible that a person doing sitting meditation may enter a state of meditative concentration in which the pulse becomes almost undetectable. To those who are unfamiliar with the practice of meditation, the person in meditative concentration may appear to be dead. There is a story of an old monk who entered into meditative concentration during one of his sessions of sitting meditation. When his young disciple felt for his pulse and discovered that he was not breathing, the disciple thought the monk had passed away. Without further adieu, the disciple had the body cremated. When the old monk came out of meditative concentration, he could not find his body. From then on, the people in the temple could hear the monk calling out day and night, "Where's my house? Where's my house?" They were unnerved by his cries, so they asked one of the monk's good friends for help. This friend arrived at the temple and sat down quietly. When the old monk came in search of his house, his friend loudly replied, "Just go. Why do you still bother with your house?" When the old monk heard this, he instantly attained enlightenment and never looked for his house again.

In the days when there was no accurate way to ascertain if a person had died, this Buddhist custom of not moving the body of the dead for eight hours was a safeguard against mistakes. In a book entitled *The Truth of Death*, there is a chapter about a man who

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was mistaken for dead. It was once a Chinese custom to collect the bones of the deceased a few years after his or her passing. Many years after this man's death, the family decided it was time to open up the coffin and pack up his bones. When they opened the coffin, they were horrified to find his head turned and his limbs bent in a fetal position. The family inferred that they had mistaken him for dead when he had really just fainted. How horrified he must have been to wake up and find himself in the coffin. Thus, the Buddhist custom of not moving the body of the dead for eight hours is not without reason. It also gives the family some time to calm down and the deceased a moment of peace and quiet.

During the eight-hour waiting period, it is best if the family helps the deceased by chanting the name of the Buddha. This way, the deceased can settle his mind on the name of the Buddha as he makes the journey to another rebirth. We should also remember not to cry out loud near the deceased. If we cannot control ourselves and must cry, we should do so away from the deceased. Though the body may be stiff and cold, the consciousness may still be lingering. Our grief can cause the deceased a lot of heartache and hinder the deceased from moving on to another rebirth.

Is it actually necessary to grieve over the death of a person? We can think of dying as going away on

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a vacation, and rejoice over the happy and pleasant trip awaiting the deceased. When our loved ones pass away, we can think of them going to the heavenly realms or becoming a Buddha. Dying should be perceived as a journey to the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, a land where suffering is nowhere to be found. Is this not wonderful? In Buddhism, we look at death as the beginning of a new life, like a chrysalis metamorphosing into a beautiful butterfly, or a chick breaking out of its shell. Why do those who are alive hold on so tightly and feel such sorrow for those who die?

In regards to funeral arrangements, Buddhism encourages cremation. It is both convenient and sanitary, especially in densely populated areas. Unlike burials, cremations do not require much space; they are also relatively inexpensive. I remember an elderly monk once said to me, “After I pass away, please scatter my ashes into the ocean for the fish and shrimp. That way, I can build good affinities with the creatures of the sea.” This is such a carefree way to look at life and death, and is a stark contrast to the egocentric tendency most of us have. Some people are very selfish and greedy. While they are alive, they want to acquire this plot of land or possess that one. Even after they pass away, they still want to compete with the living for the best and most spacious grounds for burial. How ridiculous that is!

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Some of you may say that a Buddhist funeral is dignified, but too simple. How do we show our love for the deceased if we do not conduct an elaborate ceremony or bury the dead at a picturesque site? I guess the answer to this question really depends on one's view of death. If we can truly let go of life and death, we will not be restricted by the social customs dictating what is appropriate for funerals. Zhuangzi, a famous ancient Chinese philosopher, was someone who did not feel restricted by the social customs of the times. When he was dying, his disciples gathered to discuss his funeral arrangements. Zhuangzi, who overheard the discussion, laughed and said, "The heavens and the earth are my coffin, the sun and the moon are my treasures, the stars are my gems, and I have the whole world to accompany me. Aren't these enough? Is there anything more grand?"

The disciples listened in disbelief and answered, "We can't do that. If we leave your body out in the open, the crows and eagles will come and peck at your body. It's better if we use a suitable coffin."

Zhuangzi smiled and said, "What difference does it make? If you leave me out in the open, the crows and eagles will come and peck at my body. If you bury me in a coffin, the ants and maggots will still come and feed on my flesh. Why do you rob from the crows just to feed the ants? Why are you so unfair?"

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It is not enough to just have the proper funeral arrangements; we should also have the proper perspective about death. By cutting back on elaborate funeral arrangements and using the money instead for charity, we can allow the deceased to leave some of his love behind for the living. If circumstances permit, we should not hesitate to participate in organ donor programs to save the lives of those in need. When we have the right perspective about death, we can then handle funeral arrangements with wisdom and in such a way that both the living and the dead benefit.

As seen from the above-mentioned Buddhist perspectives on funerals, Buddhists do not perceive death as an annihilation or eternal sleep. Buddhists look at death as moving from one house to another, or from one environment to another. In the sutras, there are many similes about death:

1. Death is like being born again

Death is the beginning of another life; it is not the end. The process of death can be likened to the process of making oil from sesame seeds or the creation of butter from milk.

2. Death is like a graduation

A person's life can be compared to a student's time spent in school, and death is like the graduation.

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When we graduate from school, our grades reflect how good a student we have been. Similarly, when we die, the circumstances into which we are reborn depend on the wholesome and unwholesome karma we have accumulated.

### 3. Death is like moving

When there is birth, there is death. Death is like moving out of an old house into a newer house.

### 4. Death is like the changing of clothes

Death is like taking off old, worn-out clothes and putting on new ones. When we can grasp that all our experiences in life are like floating clouds passing before our very eyes, we will see that the body is nothing more than an article of clothing.

### 5. Death is renewal

Our body undergoes metabolic processes every second. New cells are created when old ones die. The cycle of birth and death is similar to the process of creating new cells to replace old ones.

When we possess the right perspective about death, we will not be fearful of death. What we should be concerned about is not when we shall die, but what follows after we die. When we are alive,

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most of us can only think about enjoying ourselves and having a good time. We spend our time pursuing fame and fortune, without a clear view of where we are headed. A life without a clear sense of purpose or direction is meaningless. What are fame and fortune to us when we lay dying on our deathbeds? When we know how to live our lives, then we will know how to handle our deaths. Confucius once said, “If one does not understand life, how can one comprehend death?” We should not be consumed by our fear of dying, when the real tragedy would be if we lived our lives in delusion and ignorance. We may be alive in body, but dead in spirit. The urgent task at hand is for us to see life and death in the context of impermanence, suffering, and emptiness. If we can accomplish this, we will be able to find meaning in life and death.

#### **IV. Unusual Deaths and Extraordinary Deaths**

Some of you may ask how death can possibly be wonderful and extraordinary. If we take a moment to think this through carefully, we will see that death naturally becomes a wonderful thing. When we have a correct understanding of the Buddha’s teachings, we will see through death’s cloak of mystery and be completely at peace with both life and death. Chan Master Fenyang Shanzhao stated it well when he said: “One lives for all beings and dies for all beings.”

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There is a great story about the way in which Shanzhao passed away. When Shanzhao was alive, there was a powerful magistrate by the name of Li Hou. Li had always wanted Shanzhao to become abbot of Chengtian Temple, and so he offered the position to the Master on three separate occasions. When the Chan master continued to deny his offers, Li was so furious that he ordered a messenger to pay the Master a visit and personally escort the monk to the temple. As the messenger was about to set out, the magistrate told him explicitly, "Listen carefully. If you don't come back with the Master, your life will not be spared!"

The messenger was petrified. He went to the Chan master and begged the Master to go with him to Chengtian Temple. When the Master learned of the messenger's predicament, he realized he did not have much of a choice. He gathered all of his disciples together and told them, "How can I leave you behind and go to become the abbot of Chengtian Temple? But if I take all of you along, you won't be able to keep up with me."

One of the disciples went up and said, "Master, can I go with you? I can walk eighty miles a day."

The Master shook his head and sighed, "That's too slow. You won't be able to keep up with me."

Another disciple called out, "I'll go! I can walk a hundred and twenty miles a day."

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The Master shook his head again and said, “Too slow, that’s too slow!”

The disciples looked at each other in confusion. They all wondered: Just how fast could the Master travel? At that moment, another disciple quietly came forward. He bowed to the Master and said, “Master, I understand. I’ll go with you.”

The Master asked, “How far can you walk in a day?”

The disciple replied, “I can walk however far the Master walks.”

Hearing this, the Master smiled and said, “Very good. Let’s go!”

Smiling, and without as much as a stir, the Chan master sat down on his Dharma seat and passed away. The disciple who had volunteered stood respectfully beside the Master and passed away as well. To be able to leave this world in this way is truly liberating!

Chan Master Depu of the Song dynasty was equally carefree when he passed away. One day, he gathered his disciples around him and said, “I’m about to go. I’m not sure how you will make offerings to me after my death and whether I will have the time to come back and enjoy them. This being the case, why don’t we take advantage of the time that I am alive and enjoy the offerings now.”

Though the disciples felt their teacher was acting strangely, they did not dare disobey their teacher.

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They joyfully prepared the offerings and paid their respects to their teacher, thinking it was all a joke. Who could have known that on the next day, as soon as it stopped snowing, Chan Master Depu would really pass away.

Some of you might think that it is very strange to have a funeral service for someone before he has passed away, but it is actually quite humorous and practical. An old Chinese proverb states, "Offering a drop of water to a person while he is alive is better than offering him fountains of water after he dies." In the same light, children should be respectful to their parents while they are alive instead of giving them an elaborate funeral service after they have passed away.

Chan Master Zongyuan of the Song dynasty was also able to look at death as a kind of emancipation. He was eighty-three when he attained enlightenment and was neither attached to life nor death. When he felt it was time for him to leave the world, he did so with grace and dignity. He even composed his own elegy:

*In this world, no one lives beyond their  
time,  
For after death, we will all become dust in  
the grave.  
As I am now eighty and three;  
I write this elegy to bid my body farewell.*

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The manner in which Chan Master Xingkong passed away is also legendary. During his time, there was a ferocious bandit by the name of Xu Ming, who had killed many people and caused a great deal of suffering. Chan Master Xingkong could not bear to see the villagers suffer, so he decided to go and plead with the bandit. Though he realized that his life was in great danger, he did not fear. As he ate his meal with the bandit, he wrote this elegy for himself:

*Faced with calamity in the midst of  
upheaval,  
I am a jolly and fearless fellow.  
There is no time more perfect than now,  
Cut me in half if you please.*

Xingkong's compassion and courage converted the bandit, and many lives were saved as a result. Later, when the Master realized that the end of his life was at hand, he announced that he wanted to depart while sitting in a tub and floating along the river with the flow of the water. The Master climbed in the tub with a hole in the bottom, with a flute in his hand. The tub floated down the river amid the music of the flute and the Master passed away. The Master also left behind a poem on why he chose to leave the world in this manner:

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*A sitting or standing death cannot compare  
to a floating departure.*

*It saves firewood and the ground is not  
disturbed.*

*Leaving empty-handed is quite free and  
joyous.*

*Who can understand me?*

*Venerable Chuanzi<sup>2</sup> can.*

At the turn of the century, there was a monk in Rangoon, Burma by the name of Miaoshan. In 1934, Miaoshan became ill from heatstroke and malnutrition, and huge boils grew on his feet and back. Even so, he continued to make prostrations to the Buddha on the hot cobblestones. The boils opened up and became infected, oozing with pus and blood. Still, he was unfazed by his condition and refused medical treatment. He would not even take a bath, and nobody knew what to do. On the day of his death, one of his disciples again suggested to him that he should take a cool bath. This time, the Venerable nodded and replied, "I'm glad you asked me to bathe. It's time." With these words, he went into the bathroom and happily took his bath. The disciple, who was worried about the Venerable, stood by the door and urged him to take a real good

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2. Venerable Chuanzi was a monk who also preferred to die while floating on water.

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bath in order to cool off his body. The Venerable chuckled and replied through the door, "I know. I must wash carefully. After this cleaning, I won't need one anymore."

Several hours passed; the disciple could only hear the sound of running water, but the Venerable was nowhere in sight. He pushed open the door only to find that the Venerable had passed away. Miaoshan was still standing, but his heart had stopped beating. When we can let go of our attachments, we too will no longer fear death.

There are many more examples of Chan masters dying peaceful deaths. Chan Master Danxia Tianran died leaning on his walking staff. Venerable Huixiang died kneeling down with a sutra in his hand. Chan Master Liangjie of the Tang dynasty had complete control over the timing of his death; he was asked to stay alive for seven more days and so he did. Chan Master Yuan came back to life after he had been in his coffin for three days. Chan Master Guling Shenzan asked his disciples, "Do you know what soundless *samadhi*, meditative concentration, means?" When his disciples answered their master in the negative, the Master closed his lips tightly and died instantaneously. The ways in which Pang Yun and his family passed away were even more varied and fascinating. His daughter Lingzhao sat in her father's chair and passed away, while Pang Yun lay

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himself down to die. When his son, who was working in the fields, heard of their deaths, he set down his plow and died standing. Pang Yun's wife saw that all of them had passed away, so she pushed open a gap in a boulder and went inside. Before she went into the boulder, she left behind this verse:

*To die while sitting, lying down, or standing  
is not unusual  
Mrs. Pang simply let go and departed  
With both hands she pushed open a  
seamless rock  
And left without a trace.*

When we have the wisdom to see through life and death, we, too, can pass away as painlessly and effortlessly as some of the Chan masters we talked about today. With birth comes death. Whether we are Buddhists or not, we all still have to face death one day. Hopefully, with the Buddha's teachings, we can understand life, and therefore death. We should not fear death for it is nothing but a natural phenomenon. When we are prepared in life, then we can be hopeful about what follows after death.

We make provisions for everything in life. We keep a flashlight in case of emergencies or blackouts. We have an umbrella for rainy days. We pack food for long trips, and we change our wardrobes to prepare for the changing of seasons. Likewise, we should

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prepare ourselves spiritually for the day when death comes knocking on our door. Not only should we have hope for the present, we should also be mindful of life after death. Amid the impermanence of life and death, we should keep in mind that the Dharma body<sup>3</sup> is eternal and the wisdom-life is timeless. Our Buddha nature is everlasting!

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3. The body of the Buddha's teachings.