

A Personal Essay by Upasaka Fa Huo

DYING IS REALLY
NO DIFFERENT FROM
EATING LUNCH
OR TAKING
A CAB RIDE.

Death is the Great Teacher, the Great Equalizer. Death claims the rich as well as the poor, it fells the powerful just as swiftly as the powerless. Death teaches us how precious life is, and brings into painful focus the precariousness of our sense of self. Death is also the ultimate irony, for it underscores the value of life by negating it; we tend to value life more when faced with the prospect of losing it, since only then can we muster the willpower to live our lives mindfully, a day at a time -- a moment at a time.

Our Lin Chi Chan school emphasizes mindful living; it teaches us to be fully present in the moment during every single minute of our day. This relentless focus on awareness brings with it a strong wonderment towards life, and it makes us value life because we are alive and not because we will die. The difference is not semantic: if we value life because we fear death, we can be happy only as long as we ignore the fact that we will die someday, and we become anguished as soon as we suspect that our life is endangered. This is a deluded and egotistical form of valuing life in that it humors the wants of our ego. The ego claims immortality but it is not the ego that is immortal. The ego is focused on the self, and feeds the self's need for self preservation and discrimination. The ego blinds us to the reality of mortality, as well as to the reality that our essence, our Buddha essence, is indeed immortal.

In Chan, we value life not because of a fear of death, but because *we are alive!* We value life for itself, not for its absence. Not for its eventual cessation. This frame of mind arises from awareness, and is facilitated through the contemplative practice of meditation. Once we free ourselves from concerns of death, we make a great step towards grinding down our dualistic thought; we value life for what it is, for its "suchness" as well as for the opportunities it affords us, not because it props up our ego and ensures its survival. The life/death dualistic view of existence isolates us from the world, causing us to seek to create classifications, categories, and other things that express our sense of separation from the world around us. A mind that avoids the reality of death cannot affirm the value of life. The ego's tendency to value only what it can lose leads to dualistic thought which isolates us further from the others around us. This tendency stems from the root of all dualistic views: that which sees the ego as a self-standing entity, existing on its own, separate from all that surrounds it. Dualistic thought leads to alienation from our True Nature because it makes us see ourselves as separate from the others: valuing life because we will lose it is a primal form of dualistic thought.

The need to fathom the nature of death leads many of us to Religion. A commentator once wrote that religion was created by our restless minds as a way to cope with death. Buddhism is no different in this regard, but unlike other religions it significantly tones down the focus on death by classifying it as one more form of suffering, and by providing very clear instructions on how to address suffering, which is, itself, the solution for understanding death.

Chan Buddhism has no formula for how to overcome or transcend death. In Chan we deal with death not by trying to avoid it, or by hoping to attain rebirth in another form or another realm. We recognize that death is another point of change on an infinite continuum of change. If we attribute suffering to death, then death is suffering. If we attribute death to a



process of change, removing our projections of fear, then it is just that. The Chan practices of concentration and meditation make clear the inherent lack of individual-nature in everything - including us. And it makes clear that the unifying essence of Buddha Nature permeates everything, both in space and in time, the realization of this fact dispels the duality that so feeds the ego. The practice of the eightfold path is the first step toward relieving suffering, and it prepares us for ultimate liberation from delusion and, thereby, death.

In Chan, death is no different from lunch or from a cab ride: it is just an event that happens of its own accord. Death is only tragic for the ego, for it is only the ego that fears it, and for good reason, because the ego knows it will sever the connection with all its attachments, which is all the ego is. What it doesn't know, is that its very existence eliminates our chance of attaining a pure, egoless, awareness - what we call the "enlightened mind." For those of us who have taken the Bodhisattva vows, which includes the promise to help other sentient beings, it raises the question of how we can help other sentient beings attain an enlightened mind if we, ourselves, haven't yet found it. The realization of our impending death should bring a sharp sense of urgency to our practice, for we can only attain enlightenment while alive, and we can die at any moment. When I received the five precepts from Abbot Chuan Zhi, he expressed to me this sense of urgency: Don't waste time. Zen is a matter of life and death.

I had read how Hsu Yun used to talk about Chan as "a matter of life and death," but it takes great effort—or a close call with death for us to internalize this point.

None of these aspects I'm discussing are mere philosophical or religious bantering:

I have just been diagnosed with prostate cancer. It was fortunate that it was diagnosed early and that I have been a Dharma practitioner for so long: for one, I seem to have a good chance of cure and, for another, because this brought renewed energy and focus to my practice.

Prostate cancer is a type of cancer that grows slowly - which is not necessarily good news for someone like me who still hasn't clocked 50 years of age, yet its treatment has a host of side effects that rob us of our dignity and sense of self. What a great solution for rapid advances in Zen! Here lies a great opportunity to practice: not only am I given a sharp reminder of how tenuous life is, but it also brought my mind to focus on several hua tous: "Who is this I?" "Whose identity is threatened by the disease?" "What is this dignity that I supposedly have and that I am being robbed of, and who is the one being robbed?"

I also have the privilege of observing my mind as it indulges in all sorts of negative thoughts and feelings: a sense of loss, a fear of the unknown, frustration. And, on the other hand, I observe the more rational mind answering that these feelings make no sense, that they apply to the interpretation of some knowledge that I now have about my death - in many cases to inference about that knowledge - and not to facts: my likelihood of dying did not change by my knowing the probable cause for my death. The only change is that now I have something around which my restless monkey mind can busy itself with. My mind's craving for duality just found a new tool! But this has also given me a renewed sense of urgency and a far greater focus on practice, I can now raise a doubt when using a hua tou, and the doubt is solid and strong. The doubt just . . . is, and I see what's beyond the doubt.

I don't know if I'll be cured, or if this growth inside me will kill me, but I thank it for raising in me such strong and present doubt, a mind that questions and investigates deeply.