

Robert Cusick Coastside Vipassana 06-30-2010



The Dharma talk on June 23rd was by Robert Cusick. Robert has been practicing Buddhist meditation since 1997. He is a student of Gil Fronsdal and was trained as a Buddhist monk at Pa Auk Forest Monastery in Burma. He also trained in the Soto Zen tradition at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in 2001. He has worked with Hameed Ali in the Diamond Approach (Diamond Heart Six) and is a certified Kripalu Yoga teacher. Robert participated in the 2nd Buddhist Chaplaincy training offered through the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies and completed the first Dedicated Practitioners Program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in 2003. He subsequently served there in the role of Retreats Program Manager.

Death and Dying

The Buddha used the topic of death and dying to liberate the mind. This topic is personal, powerful, and poignant. We won't approach this the same way monastics do – that way might seem disrespectful to non-monastics – but we will approach Death as an opportunity to investigate our thoughts and attitudes.

Death, like life, is a process. Death is not a thing, but an experience. Whether or not you believe in rebirth, death is a process beginning in infancy, through childhood, adolescence, maturity, and old age. Of course, death can come at anytime during that process.

The purpose of this talk is to allow us to experience death without fear or dread. It is important to recognize that our attitudes toward death can affect the dying process. It is not uncommon to avoid thinking about death. So, when death finally comes upon us, we may be full of regrets and unfinished business, and we may not have the energy or will to look within ourselves and resolve what is troubling us.

The time to look at death is *now*. The time to prepare for death is *now*. Consider this:

A. DEATH IS CERTAIN

1. There is no possible way to escape death. No-one ever has, not even Jesus, Buddha, etc. Of the current world population of over 5 billion people, almost none will be alive in 100 years time.

2. *Life has a definite, inflexible limit and each moment brings us closer to the finality of this life. We are dying from the moment we are born.*

3. *Death comes in a moment and its time is unexpected. All that separates us from the next life is one breath.*

B. THE TIME OF DEATH IS UNCERTAIN

4. *The duration of our lifespan is uncertain. The young can die before the old, the healthy before the sick, etc.*

5. *There are many causes and circumstances that lead to death, but few that favour the sustenance of life.*

Even things that sustain life can kill us, for example food, motor vehicles, property.

6. *The weakness and fragility of one's physical body contribute to life's uncertainty.*

The body can be easily destroyed by disease or accident, for example cancer, AIDS, vehicle accidents, other disasters.

C. THE ONLY THING THAT CAN HELP US AT THE TIME OF DEATH IS OUR MENTAL/SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

(because all that goes on to the next life is our mind with its karmic (positive or negative) imprints.)

7. *Worldly possessions such as wealth, position, money can't help*

8. *Relatives and friends can neither prevent death nor go with us.*

9. *Even our own precious body is of no help to us. We have to leave it behind like a shell, an empty husk, an overcoat.*

For those that believe in rebirth, a mind calm at death has a different destination than one in turmoil. What is passed on is our *karma*. We should live in such a way right now that creates the best karmic outcome at time of death.

Having a spiritual refuge is a great comfort at time of death. Don't wait until your life is ending to cultivate virtue. Do it now. Realize the preciousness of life. Have no fear and no regrets when your death is upon you, but enter death with equanimity and serenity. Reflection on death is a protective meditation.

When sitting with someone who is dying, looking at death is looking at things as they are. Don't minimize it and throw out platitudes about: "everything will be okay." Denying the possibility of death may make them shut down. Do not deny death or push it away. Instead, remind the person of the good things they've done, and your best memories of them.

From the Zen Hospice Project:

Five Precepts of Service

"...as a companion for those accompanying the dying. These are bottomless practices that can be continually explored and deepened through action."

Frank Ostaseski, Co-founder, Zen Hospice Project, San Francisco, CA

The First Precept: ***Welcome everything. Push nothing away.***

This precept asks us to cultivate a fearless receptivity. Life is a journey of continuous discovery. We are all always entering new territory and have no idea how things will turn out. It takes courage and flexibility to find balance. The journey that is life is a mystery we need to live into – opening, risking and forgiving constantly. "Welcome everything. Push nothing away."

The Second Precept: ***Bring Your Own Self to the Experience.***

This precept calls on us to invite it all in. We can't be with others in territory that we ourselves haven't explored. Become familiar with your own inner life, with your joys and sorrows. In this way you can form an empathetic bridge to the experience and suffering of others. "Bring your own self to the experience."

The Third Precept: ***Don't Wait.***

Waiting is full of expectations. When we wait for the next moment, we miss this one. When we wait for the moment of death, we miss so many moments of living. Don't wait. If there's someone you love, tell them you love them. Tell them now. Allow the precious nature of this human life to show you what's most important, then enter fully into the experience of this very moment. "Don't wait."

The Fourth Precept: ***Find a Place of Rest in the Middle of Things.***

Though we imagine rest is the end product of arranging the conditions of our lives to accommodate our preferences, it is nevertheless possible to discover rest – even in the middle of chaos. Rest is experienced when we bring our full attention, without distraction, to this very moment, to this very activity. Here, in this place, rest is always available. It is never sick and does not die. "Find a place of rest in the middle of things."

The Fifth Precept: **Cultivate 'Don't Know' Mind.**

This precept is pointing to a mind that is open and receptive, not limited by agendas, roles or expectations. The great Zen teacher, Suzuki Roshi, was fond of saying, "There are many possibilities in the beginner's mind, but in the expert's there are few." Learn how to see with fresh eyes in each and every moment of experience. "Cultivate 'Don't Know' Mind."

A Tibetan Buddhist site gives these recommendations:

The state of mind at the time of death is regarded as extremely important, because this plays a vital part in the situation one is reborn into. This is one reason why suicide is regarded in Buddhism as very unfortunate, because the state of mind of the person who commits suicide is usually depressed and negative and is likely to throw them into a lower rebirth. Also, it doesn't end the suffering, it just postpones it to another life.

When considering the spiritual care of the dying, it can be helpful to divide people into several different categories, because the category they are in will determine the most useful approach to use. These categories are: 1) whether the person is conscious or unconscious, and 2) whether they have a religious belief or not. In terms of the first category, if the person is conscious they can do the practices themselves or someone can assist them, but if they are unconscious someone has to do the practices for them. For the second category, if a person has specific religious beliefs, these can be utilised to help them. If they do not, they still need to be encouraged to have positive/virtuous thoughts at the time of death, such as reminding them of positive things they have done during their life.

For a spiritual practitioner, it is helpful to encourage them to have thoughts such as love, compassion, remembering their spiritual teacher. It is beneficial also to have an image in the room of Jesus, Mary, Buddha, or some other spiritual figure that may have meaning for the dying person. It may be helpful for those who are with the dying person to say some prayers, recite mantras etc. - this could be silent or aloud, whatever seems most appropriate.

However, one needs to be very sensitive to the needs of the dying person. The most important thing is to keep the mind of the person happy and calm. Nothing should be done (including certain spiritual practices) if this causes the person to be annoyed or irritated. There is a common conception that it is good to read "The Tibetan Book of the Dead" to the dying person, but if he/she is not familiar with the particular deities and practices contained in it, then this is not likely to prove very beneficial.

Because the death process is so important, it is best not to disturb the dying person with noise or shows of emotion. Expressing attachment and clinging to the dying person can disturb the mind and therefore the death process, so it is more helpful to mentally let the person go, to encourage them to move on to the

next life without fear. It is important not to deny death or to push it away, just to be with the dying person as fully and openly as possible, trying to have an open and deep sharing of the person's fear, pain, joy, love, etc.

As mentioned previously, when a person is dying, their mind becomes much more subtle, and they are more open to receiving mental messages from those people close to them. So silent communication and prayer can be very helpful. It is not necessary to talk much. The dying person can be encouraged to let go into the light, into God's love etc. (again, this can be verbal or mental).

When Robert was volunteering for the Zen Hospice, he went to visit a patient in a coma. The family was there, so Robert silently began Metta blessings, but personalized with the patient's name:

May you be happy, Jeffery

May you be at ease, Jeffery

...

Soon everyone left, and Robert began repeating the blessings out loud. When he looked over at the patient, he saw tears running down his face. Even though he was in a coma, he could still hear what was going on. Shortly after that, Robert had a vision of the patient walking toward the ocean, then turning around, he looked at his life and all he would lose, and began crying again...and died.

When Death Comes

By Mary Oliver

*When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse*

*to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox;*

*when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,*

*I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?*

*And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,*

*and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,*

*and each name a comfortable music in the mouth
tending as all music does, toward silence,*

*and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.*

*When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.*

*When it is over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.*

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.