

A Buddhist Approach to Death and Dying

Sanja Dejanovic, PhD

line. bridge. body publication 2026 ©

Introduction

Death is one of, if not, the greatest paradoxes of life. It is the unknown certainty of mortality, that regardless of our inner powers of imagining, striving, and desiring, we are unable to evade and overcome. It is a biological certainty that presents an unsurmountable limit point to all of our strivings and entanglements, premised on the idea of longevity, of no certain or definitive end in sight. Evade we might attempt to do so, responding to a deep inner sense of and desire for self perpetuation and continuity. And why would we not? As Desjarlais (2016) has said more broadly in *Subject to Death: Life and Loss in a Buddhist World*, “dying tears at the self, dying tears at the world” (p. 29); it signals an utter dissolution of the self, which we might have all of our lives defended and committed to as a singular way of being in the world, regardless of its perceived levels of disfunction. We hold onto and are held by our sense of self. It is how we know to be, beyond which, in the sense of not-being or -existing, appears as an impossibility and an abstraction; a mere word play that we have difficulties wrapping our brains around (O’Conner, 2022). The deep sense of attachment to self, invokes the simultaneously deeply rooted attachments we form to others with whom we experience this existence.

Though Western philosophies of the past century influenced by Heidegger’s phenomenological account of death, have proposed that being-toward-death is a person’s own-most possibility that individuates them, rendering the person more authentically aware in the world, such an account foregoes the death of the other, as a significant moment of encounters with death (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2006). Yet, it is precisely the dying and death of others that activates our wondering about this estranged paradox of life, as we are confronted with an inexplicable looming absence that is to be or is, previously filled with their lively presence. Even if we were to begin with the self, assuming that the death of self is more significant to each of us

in contrast to the death of the other, if we accept that we are already always inextricably intertwined with other's existence, then, dying and death cannot be experientially only my own. As Lingis (2000) has aptly put it, "we die *with* others" (p. 106). Surely, the dying and death of another is a uniquely devastating call that trembles our world, receiving diverging responses, in great part, depending on the capacities, understandings, and tolerances we have hitherto cultivated in self. As Halifax's (1997) writes in *Being with Dying: Cultivating Compassion and Fearlessness of Death*: "We often aren't available for those who need us, paralyzed as we are by anxiety and resistance—nor are we available for ourselves" (p. xvii). Dying and death can be tremendously difficult, disruptive, and dysregulating, not only because we cannot bring ourselves to face the loss of a loved one, but also because we are unwilling or unable to encounter ourselves in a world of their dying and death.

What does the Buddhism have to tell us about dying and death? What does it have to contribute to our capacity to respond to and accompany others (Hooke, 1997)? What does Buddhism have to teach us about the fear of death or death anxiety? This paper takes up dying and death as a process from a Buddhist perspective, inquiring how it orients itself toward this fundamental paradox of life. The second section of this paper focuses on how Buddhism can assist us in accompanying dying others, not only as care providing professionals, but more broadly how it can inform our ethical praxis. A focus is placed on Buddhist approaches to fear of death or death anxiety, and how such approach can mutually assist self and other.

Section One: Dying and Death in Buddhism

The notion that Western culture is a death denying culture, is not new (Kastenbaum & Moreman, 2018). There are countless works which explore the denial of death and its implications, some of these being, as Halifax's (1997) notes, that denial "leaves us woefully

unprepared when it is our time to die, or our time to help others die” (p. xvii). An interesting phenomenon in itself, death denial fundamentally relates to the Buddhist understanding of delusion, the notion that we are willing to obscure from ourselves the reality of our existence for the sake of maintaining an enduring self-formation that lulls us into a comforting sense of permanence (Wallis, 2007). It is unsurprising then that death denial should have as its sister concept, death anxiety or fear of death, which though approached differently as anxiety and fear, refer to inner unease formed by the concurrent implicit awareness of and resistance to the unknown that is death (Kastenbaum & Moreman, 2018).

Several philosophical responses have been formulated to alleviate such fear of death and death anxiety. Most notably, the Epicureans posited that “death, the most frightening of bad things, is nothing to us; since when we exist, death is not present, and when death is present, then we do not exist. Therefore, it is relevant neither to the living nor the dead” (Brennan & Stainton, 2010, p. 164). Since our sensuous, embodied, experiencing ceases with death according to the Epicurean, we are to be consoled that we will thereby be completely unaware as if drifting into a deep sleep. Conversely, existentialist philosophy, particularly that of Kierkegaard, has approached death anxiety as a mood that confronts us with the dizzying possibilities of life, through which we may or may not affirm an authentic way of being (Cox, 2021).

What is the Buddhist response? I will begin to elucidate the Buddhist position by turning to the foundational teaching offered by the Buddha, with this being the Four Noble Truths, which, as Wallis (2007) emphasizes in the *Basic Teachings of the Buddha*, are more appropriately referring to the nature of reality as it is (p. 149). I have chosen to do so because it is within the thus translated *Turning the Wheel of the Teaching* sutta in Wallis’ (2007) text that the Buddha says the following: “Birth is unsettling, aging is unsettling, illness is unsettling, death is

unsettling,” thereby identifying dying and death, as existential conditions that lead to dis-ease and suffering (p. 76). It is not death in itself that necessarily produces disturbances and disequilibria, rather, according to the Buddha, death as an existential phenomenon that gives way to craving, grasping, and attachment “for being [...] [and] for non-being,” results in suffering (Wallis, 2007, p. 76). Both the desire for x to continue to exist and to cease to be or exist, can arise due to our grasping which conditions suffering. But what is this grasping?

Our tendency to want to bring about that which is pleasant and avoid that which produces pain leads to grasping as we attempt to hold onto what perpetuates a state of being, while evading what we perceive challenges, endangers, or threatens it (Koller, 2018; Dejanovic, 2022). Such dynamics mean that we orient ourselves toward self, others, and the world, as though permanence of experiences were possible beyond this moment, perhaps even beyond this mortal existence, and as though it is within our capacity to realize it (Koller, 2018; Wallis, 2007). Moreover, permanence also means that we cling onto the unbearable, becoming immersed in the effort to avoid, resist, or cease its being, thereby perpetuating a rigidified self that delimits our experiential capacities and relationality with others in the world (Koller, 2018; Dejanovic, 2022). As such, according to the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths, the response to such dis-ease and suffering, is to detach oneself from wants, anticipations, and projections that delude us from perceiving the impermanence of all that is (Koller, 2018; Wallis, 2007).

Surely, such understanding of craving, grasping, and attachment are key to appreciating how a Buddhist caregiver would respond to death denial and anxiety. The unknowns presented by the dying process and death itself, are by no means easy to grapple with or accept, for that matter. To embrace such unknowns, Buddhism accentuates the significance of mindfully cultivating a sense of impermanence (Desjarlais, 2016; Halifax, 1997). Certainly, one might

perceive impermanence itself, the noticing of all things as ceaselessly coming and going, as an aspect of the Buddhist preparation for dying and death (DeLeo, 2019; Halifax, 1997). I will delve into this in a moment. Here I want to highlight that attachment in the face of unknowns of death, which then emerge as the distressing consciousness of a world from which self or other vanish from being into non-being, brings about an inquiry into the potentials for continuation, possibilities of an after-life, and other metaphysical concerns. Though Wallis' (2007) translation of the Four Noble Truths refers to "further being" regarding this aspect of endurance after death (p. 76), another translation in *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying* by Timmerman and Cholbi (2020), refers to the "craving which produces *rebirth*" (p. 174).

This inconsistency, as well as other Buddhists texts such as the *Bardo Thodol* or *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Coleman, 2007), leads me to ask, what did the Buddha say about death or *marā*? How did he approach the question of after-life? Does something persist of us after death, or do we perish with the dissolution of physical presence? These questions are taken up in *Culamalukya Sutta* wherein Malukya demands answers to speculative questions that the Buddha has "not determined" (Wallis, 2007, p. 45). A series of questions is posited: "Does a person who has come to know reality exist after death; not exist after death; both exist and not exist after death; or neither exist nor not exist after death?" (Wallis, 2007, p. 45). The Buddha's teaching is simplistic and practical, such issues are not only not determinable or unknowable, but one could spend an entire life inquiring without a satisfactory response; "I would still not determine those matters, and in the meantime that person would die," Buddha says (Wallis, 2007, p. 46). The Buddha uses the metaphor of an arrow, to demonstrate that knowing as far as we are capable about death, does not alter the certainty of dying (Wallis, 2007).

Though we might distract, deny, and conceal from ourselves that death means the disintegration and dissolution of a lifeform in its present manifestation, metaphysical questionings do not situate us closer to after-life comprehension and, instead, demonstrate a fear of loss due to attachment to self and other permanence (Wallis, 2007). Fundamentally, the Buddha notes that, while we might posit such inquiries to appease our desire for continuation of being and soothe felt inner distress, such things are neither determinable, nor lead to the “cessation of unease” or suffering (Wallis, 2007, p. 47). To the contrary, as Wallis (2007) posits, speculative wanderings, according to Buddha, heighten distress as they obscure reality and displace us from “the direct path” of awareness, which is available to each person in their existing immediacy and being in the world (p. 49). As such, the Buddha’s response to Malukya, as to others prompted to wonder about mortality, is a redirection towards immersion in the present moment, through which one may eventually arrive at the wisdom of the interdependent arising of phenomena or, as Wallis (2007) writes, the “process behind the world’s rising and falling away” (p. 167). In other words, Buddha’s cure is aimed at alleviating “death-rattle” through meditation, in the process of which one let’s go of or releases ego-formations, desires, and cravings, that perpetuate inner turmoil (Wallis, 2007). Meditations aimed specifically at alleviating death anxiety and cultivating acceptance of death through awareness of our impermanence, are referred to as *Maranasati* (Rosenberg, 1994). Through reminders of the certainty of dying, Buddhaghosa says in the thus translated *The Path to Purification* that one “gives up the search for what is unworthy” (Rosenberg, 1994, n.p.).

Section Two: Accompanying the Other

How might psychotherapists and more widely caretakers become more capable of accompanying others as they encounter fear of death at any stage along the dying process? As

outlined in the introduction, this fear of death is not only the existential state of the other as they encounter mortality but obstructs the practitioner's ability to develop *paramitas*, such as compassion, loving-kindness, generosity, patience, needed to accompany others (Dejanovic, 2023; Garfield, 2011; Halifax, 1997). Fear presents the greatest impediment in our capacity to be with suffering others because, as DeLeo (2019) notes in her *Present through the End*, it undermines the courage, strength of the "heart bone," to compassionately face unknowns together (p. 17). In his text *No Death, No Fear: Comforting Wisdom for Life*, Thich Nhat Hanh (2002) addresses the deep rootedness of the fear of death and frames it in relation to dualistic mental formations of being and non-being. Through this dualistic lens, non-being logically translates into the opposite of existence, nothingness, which is difficult to bear and impossible to fathom (Hanh, 2002). Similarly, Epicureanism has posited that people fear death because they project the annihilation of their bodies after death while alive (Brennan & Stainton, 2010).

In addition to fostering immersion into presence and detachment through attentiveness to four areas of experiencing as part of meditation, the Buddha outlines *The Nine Cremation Ground Contemplations* which guide the practitioner toward death acceptance through visualization of their own body increasingly dissolving, akin to a corpse (Wallis, 2007). This meditation, as well as those focused on the dying process as successive disintegration of the elemental composition of the physical form, foster acceptance of impermanent form, ethical virtues such as courage, compassion, and loving-kindness where resistance to bodily disintegration, decay, and frailty would reside, and preparedness for the dying process (Hawter, 1995; Wallis, 2007). In his text *Being with Dying*, Halifax's (1997) outlines a three-part approach influenced by Roshi Bernie Glassman of how to be with others throughout the dying process. He emphasizes, firstly, the capacity to embrace a novice mind, to with humility venture, as it were,

into unknowns and be comfortable with the uncertainties that the dying process presents (Halifax, 1997). Secondly, he outlines being present with others, or being a “witness,” despite internal emotional discomforts, resistance, and tendency to self-preserve, which, as DeLeo (2019) highlights, sounds easy but is quite challenging to do in the face of another’s suffering that we are called to partake in (Halifax, 1997). To this end, mindfulness meditations, such as the “Strong back, Soft Front,” combining compassion with steady courage are useful as a way of navigating the difficulties of accompaniment, while ensuring one’s emotional equilibrium, energetic resiliency, and psychosomatic care that allows the practitioner to continue to be there for another (Halifax, 1997, pp. 14-16). If we have not sufficiently cultivated such *paramitas*, accompaniment will be fraught with difficulties, rendering us incapable of realizing mutual care and leaving us abandoned to suffering. Thirdly, to realize unrestrained compassionate, accompaniment, Halifax (1997) emphasizes the importance of awareness of the interdependence of self and others, of our shared condition, that is mortality itself.

To return to him, Thich Nhat Hanh (2002) offers further understanding of the Buddhist approach to mortality when writing that “the Buddha has a very different understanding of our existence. It is the understanding that birth and death are notions. They are not real. The fact that we think they are true, makes a powerful illusion that causes our suffering” (Hanh, 2002, p. 4). As such, Thich Nhat Hanh (2002) provides another rationale behind Buddha’s response to Malukya, which is that, for the Buddha, life and death are illusory when perceived beyond conceptual fabrications (Wallis, 2007). This is reiterated in another text on death by Soto Zen Buddhist monk Dogen, “Shōji: On Life and Death,” where he comments that for Buddha “life and death do not exist” as such (Dogen, 2007, p. 1086). The Buddha also repeatedly refers to “the deathless” throughout *suttas*, comprehended through “direct insight” (Wallis, 2007, p 28).

What is the Buddha referring to and how can such awareness ease fear? Thich Nhat Hanh's (2002; 2022) exposition is directly instructive. Using an example of a piece of paper, Thich Nhat Hanh's (2002; 2022) notes that we might perceive such a piece of paper as coming and going out of existence, becoming created and then dissolved, but in reality, a piece of paper arises due to interdependent elements coalescing in its given form. When a piece of paper appears to dissolve, it does not become nothing, its constituent aspects become something other as the conditions of form change, just as clouds do not cease to exist when it snows (Hanh, 2002; 2022).

In line with such awareness, simplistically, yet powerfully, instructed by Thich Nhat Hanh's (2002; 2022), not only is there no permanence to forms, but impermanent phenomena mindfully observed as undergoing formation and dissolution, do not uphold the conceptual delineations of birth and death. As Wallis (2007) underlines, this is what the Buddha approached as the "unbinding" or liberation from both permanence and impermanence (p. 184). How does such teaching assist the practitioner to overcome fear of death and assist others along the way? Thich Nhat Hanh (2002) writes that by appreciating what underlies impermanence "you will touch the no-birth, no-death, no-coming, no-going nature of reality. This can liberate you from your fear, from your anxiety, and your sorrow" (p. 24). Though awareness of interdependent arising releases us from approaching death as complete annihilation and from the discomforts of loss that prompt mourning and grief, in my view, it is aimed at redirecting us toward life itself and the world in all of its vibrancy, within which we cultivate relationships that render it meaningful (Hanh, 2002). It is by cultivating awareness of interdependence, the appreciation that self and other beings are intertwined, that we are able to, as Thich Nhat Hanh (2002; 2022) notes, perceive the inner Buddha-nature of the other, beyond the curtain of birth and death. As Desjarlais (2016) wrote, death entails the disintegration of the self, or a reconfiguration of the

world in the physical absence of the other, but it can also lead to the reaffirmation of loving-kindness cultivated in relationship guiding us forward after loss (O’Conner, 2022).

Conclusion

In concluding, it is pertinent to emphasize that it is this perception of interdependency, the notion that self and other are inseparable, that prompts many of us to summon our inner well of heart-centered generosity, courage, and compassion to accompany dying other or assist those encountering mortality as caregivers and/or psychotherapists (Dejanovic, 2023; Garfield, 2011). Often times, it is the dying of loved others and personal loss itself as a recognized shared condition of all sentient beings, that can stimulate questions regarding dying, mortality, and after-life. Though, assuredly, our death is our own, the dying of others can prompt explorations and learning regarding how to overcome fear of death so as to accompany others in their suffering, loss, and anxieties. The Buddhist approach I have outlined explores some of the ways in which a practitioner can accompany others and that such presence requires a mutual cultivation of capacities, beginning with overcoming resistances presented by fear.

References

- Brennan, S., & Stainton, R. (Eds.). (2010). *Philosophy and Death: Introductory Readings*. Broadview Press.
- Coleman, G. (Ed.). (2007). *Bardo Thodol or The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Penguin Classics.
- Cox, G. (2021). Kierkegaard: Young, Free & Anxious. *Philosophy Now*.
https://philosophynow.org/issues/145/Kierkegaard_Young_Free_and_Anxious
- Dejanovic, S. (2022). *Buddhist Relational Wisdom: Contributions to Psychotherapeutic Treatment of Attachment*. [Unpublished Paper]. Theology, Martin Luther University College.
- Dejanovic, S. (2023). *Buddhist Discourses of Care W10 Reflection*. [Unpublished Reflection]. Theology, Martin Luther University College.
- DeLeo, K. (2019). *Present through the End: A Caring Companion's Guide for Accompanying the Dying*. Shambhala.
- Desjarlais, R. R. (2016). *Subject to Death: Life and Loss in a Buddhist World*. University of Chicago Press.
- Dogen, E. (2007). *The Shōbōgenzō*. Shasta Abbey Press.
- Dreyfus, H., & Wrathall, M. A. (Eds.). (2006). *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Garfield, J. (2011). What is it like to be a bodhisattva? Moral phenomenology in Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 33(1-2), pp. 333-357.
- Hahn, T. N. (2002). *No Death, No Fear: Comforting Wisdom for Life*. Ebury Publishing.

Hahn, T. N. (2022). No Birth, No Death. [YouTube]. *Plum Village App*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwoTsoeIfcQ&t=198s>

Halifax, J. (1997). *Being with Dying: Cultivating Compassion and Fearlessness of Death*.

Shambhala.

Hawter, P. (1995). Death and Dying in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition. *Buddhanet: Buddha*

Dharma Education Association Inc. <https://www.buddhanet.net/deathtib.htm>

Hooke, A. E. (1997). An Ethic of Accompanying the Dying. *Philosophy Today*, pp. 153-160.

[https://www.pdcnet.org/collection/fshow?id=philtoday_1997_0041Supplement_0153_01](https://www.pdcnet.org/collection/fshow?id=philtoday_1997_0041Supplement_0153_0160&pdfname=philtoday_1997_0041Supplement_0153_0160.pdf&file_type=pdf)

[60&pdfname=philtoday_1997_0041Supplement_0153_0160.pdf&file_type=pdf](https://www.pdcnet.org/collection/fshow?id=philtoday_1997_0041Supplement_0153_0160&pdfname=philtoday_1997_0041Supplement_0153_0160.pdf&file_type=pdf)

Kastenbaum, R., & Moreman, C. M. (2018). *Death, Society, and Human Experience*. Routledge.

Koller, J. M. (2018). *Asian Philosophies*. (7th edition). Routledge.

Lingis, A. (2000). To Die With Others. *Diacritics*, 30(3), pp. 106-113.

O'Conner, M. (2022). *The Grieving Brain: The Surprising Science of How we Learn from Love and Loss*. HarperOne.

Rosenberg, L. (1994). Shining the Light of Death and Life: Maranasati Meditation (Part I). *Barre*

Center for Buddhist Studies. <https://www.buddhistinquiry.org/article/shining-the-light-of-death-on-life-maranasati-meditation-part-i/>

Timmerman, T., & Cholbi, M. (2020). *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*. Routledge.

Wallis, G. (2007). *Basic Teachings of the Buddha*. The Modern Library. Kindle Edition.

https://read.amazon.ca/?asin=B000V2S09K&ref_=kwl_kr_iv_rec_1