

Meeting the End of Life Without Impediments

Part 2: Rebirth

We wish to meet the end of life without impediments and that the Great and Holy Ones may come from afar to receive us....May we leave this world...in the twinkling of a second and, in a flash, reach the Sea of the Lotus.

Without abandoning this holy place we may, if it so be His wish, re-enter the world of men, thereafter being well versed in those expediences to enlighten sentient beings and adroitly to convert all earthly toil to Buddhist service. Lotus Ceremony, Lay Liturgy Book, pp. 201-204

Our practice in daily life not only prepares us for death, it prepares us for rebirth. Sometimes I encounter fear, confusion, or doubt among Western Buddhists regarding rebirth. It seems caused largely by lack of faith (right view or understanding), the first step of the Buddha's Eightfold Path.

The above offertory from our liturgy's Lotus Ceremony points to the correct understanding of nirvana and rebirth. We don't leave nirvana by being reborn. We don't abandon that "holy place" when we are born again, so why be afraid? If we are, the solution is right at hand. In our moment-to-moment choices we train ourselves out of that fear so that rebirth is just another moment in time, and not to be feared. Recently I learned that native Tibetan lay Buddhists don't fear death, but they greatly fear unfortunate rebirth. I would not want to scare anyone into religious training, but a healthy respect for the law of karma, along with an awareness of the preciousness of human rebirth, provide a great incentive for practicing lovingkindness, compassion, restraint, and patience. We know what the fruits of these seeds will be, and what the fruits of less lovely seeds will be, too. These positive qualities are not miraculously handed out to some people, but can be cultivated by everyone in the practice of everyday life as discussed in Part 1. Thus preparing for death is preparing for life, and vice versa. It sounds almost too simple to be true: the best preparation for a good death and fortunate rebirth is to live a good life.

In serene reflection meditation, we learn to be still in the midst of the winds of daily life (karma) and make the best choices possible by relying on the precepts and Buddha nature. From what I understand, this is exactly what all the exhortations for the dying describe. Stillness, brightness, don't be pulled off center. Don't be drawn to the attractive, don't run away from the fearful. Be still, be bright, look up.

Then comes rebirth, "if it so be His wish." Whose wish? Are we creating a personal God here? No. I've found this phrase to suggest two meanings. The first is bodhichitta, the Buddha-seeking mind, the heart that wishes for the enlightenment of all beings. (It's critical for contemplative practitioners to remember that "all beings" includes those found within one's own karmic stream, who are assisted by just sitting still, meditation itself.) By

cultivating, as in a garden, the Bodhisattva vow in daily life, we strengthen this intention so that it becomes our personality, who we fundamentally are. At death and rebirth our great wish – the thought that is uppermost in our mind and heart – is His great wish: assisting others. The Buddha wishes to rescue (enlighten) sentient beings through the Dharma and He/we wish to transform (convert) whatever we do into Buddhist service (that which truly benefits others). In so doing we, the bodhisattvas, become Buddha.

The second meaning of “His wish” points to the ideal of selfless service. Dogen expressed it this way in *Shoji [Life and Death]*: “When the Buddha does all, and you follow this doing effortlessly... you...become, yourself, Buddha” (*Zen is Eternal Life*). By bringing bodhichitta to mind moment to moment, we look for and are open to see the many ways we can assist others, or at least not put obstacles in their way through nonpreceptual, unenlightened behavior. So what do we use as guiding principles? Compassion/bodhichitta, precepts, wisdom: selfless activity. “His” wish is that of the still, small voice, a mind and heart free of selfishness. This is the immaculacy of emptiness. It may not be heard as a voice, but nonetheless it can speak if we listen. “We hear with the eyes and see with the ears.” In the *Shushogi* Dogen holds up preceptual action as “non-action and non-seeking” – unselfish action and selfless seeking – “the awakening to True Wisdom.”

Cultivating stillness, meditation, brings wisdom, wise discernment. Samadhi, the mirror-like bright, meditating mind leads to prajna, wisdom, seeing clearly. This wisdom is not conceptual knowledge, but a faculty of seeing things as they truly are. We see without discrimination the suffering of the world (samsara) simultaneously together with its enlightened aspects (nirvana). What a great asset going into the end of life! What could be of greater use in seeing us through the “unreality of death” and choice of a fortunate rebirth in which our karma stands the best chance of being cleansed and brought to peace?

The *Scripture of Great Wisdom* outlines this fundamental practice of letting go of impediments or obstructions: “In the mind of the Bosatsu [Bodhisattva] who is truly one with Wisdom Great, the obstacles dissolve.” The result is a state “beyond this human mind,” where “he [the Bodhisattva] IS Nirvana.” When we meditate and practice the precepts selflessly with a compassionate heart, when we let go of greed, hatred and delusion, the impediments vanish. We experience, we ARE, Nirvana. All that remains is the ongoing commitment to endless training, wherever we find ourselves, in this life or another. We call upon the Buddha to lead us: “O Buddha, going, going, going on beyond / And always going on beyond, always BECOMING Buddha. Hail! Hail! Hail!”

I hope these two articles illumine the value for life’s end of what we are doing right now, our regular practice of formal seated meditation and preceptual, compassionate activity in all we do. We don’t have to wait until we are on our deathbed to do the momentous work of dying: daily life is our great opportunity. As in life, so in death; as in life, so in rebirth.

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