

On Death

BY

Guo Gu

Guo Gu first learned meditation in 1972 when he was four years old, studying with a respected Chinese meditation master in Taiwan, Master Guangqin (1892–1986). In 1980, he began learning meditation from Master Sheng Yen, who was residing in New York at the time. In 1991, after college, Guo Gu was ordained as a monk and became Master Sheng Yen’s personal attendant. In 1995, he had his first Chan experience, and was given permission by the master to teach Chan independently. In 2000, Guo Gu left monasticism and re-entered the world. He received his PhD in Buddhist Studies from Princeton University in 2008 and began teaching Buddhism and East Asian religions as an Assistant Professor at Florida State University. In 2009, he founded the Tallahassee Chan Center, where has begun to build a Dharma community of senior practitioners living together.



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“DEATH” HAS PRODUCED A PROFUSION of ideas, tied to our existential fear. Since the beginning of human civilization, the awareness of what seems to be death, our eventual end, has propelled us to seek ways of transcending it. We have developed strategies, solutions, philosophies, religions, spiritual ways, up to the present time, as a result. Modern day pop culture is also in on it. Recently I saw a commercial, about a cosmetic product called “age curing” crème. It makes wrinkles from aging sound like a disease, something we must cure! Why? Because it’s a sign of death, a sign of deterioration, which is something we have to mask, conceal.

Since time immemorial, death is one of the motivating forces that drives human invention; it is also something that humans have tried to transcend or master. At the Buddha’s time, many ascetics and philosophers came up with different solutions to death. And we can see these similar “solutions” in many world religions and spiritual traditions. One common one is the Brahmanical tradition. According to Brahmanism, everyone, less those in the lowest caste, has the essence of the creator god, Brahma. What connects them to Brahma is their own essence called *atman*, the self. So, when people engage in spiritual practice, through the



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mediation of their priests, they are able to return to Brahma, who abides outside of the cyclic existence of rebirth. Other counter-Brahmanical tradition practitioners cultivated their minds in meditation, relying on their own efforts, to enter into states of deep meditative absorption to avoid death.

In Daoism, the realization of transcendence is what is called *xian*, in essence, divinity. Early Western scholars translate that as “immortality” because we in the West have a corresponding notion. But Daoist transcendence is a little bit different – it is to live as long as heaven and earth, which is a long time. This is the aim of both philosophical or religious Daoism. For the sake of brevity, philosophical Daoism refers to the eremitic tradition of self-cultivation; religious Daoism refers to lineages of ritual practice.

Around the time of the Buddha, we have evidence of ancient Chinese manuscripts talking about self-cultivation techniques, backed up with

its own philosophy that everything – from minerals and metals, to nature and human beings – is made out of *qi*, or energy. From the transformations of *qi*, forms manifest and change. The way of self-cultivation is, through diet, bodily yogic exercises, and meditative techniques, to transform and become the purist form of *qi*, ethereal and transcendent – to become a *xian* or divinity.

There are signs of mastery of death. In Christianity, you have the incorruptible body of saints, where the body, after having died, exudes a fragrance or does not decay. This is something that we can see in different cultures, such as those desert ascetics, both monks and nuns, that the eminent scholar of late antiquity Christianity (fourth to fifth centuries), Caroline Bynum, has studied. In China, many masters have died sitting upright in the meditation posture, and their bodies do not decay. We humans see these things as indications of mastery of death.

Science and modern technology also try to cure or at least slow down death. Think of plastic surgery, modern medicine, or the practice of freezing the corpse.

What I want to talk about is not technology, premodern or modern. What I want to talk about is our fear, and the stories we build around it, from the Chan perspective. When Chan Master Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163), the great proponent of huatou meditation, was dying, his disciples came around and asked, “Please, leave us with a last teaching?” Writing a death poem was and is a big deal in Chan/Zen. People collected them and included them in the discourse records of masters. Dahui picked up the pen and wrote, “Death, or no death, what’s the fuss?” And he died. You may say this is the quintessential Chan perspective.

Perhaps one of the defining features of human beings is story making. We reify experiences into “things” and make assessments about them: good, bad; pretty, ugly; life, death; beginning, end. When we deem something good, we want to keep it, prolong it, possess it. When we deem something bad, we try to get rid of it, escape from it, fear it. But “things” are not what we imagine them to be, or how we wish them to be. Conflating our own imaginations with fluid realities is called *prapañca*, which belongs to the realm of imagination, stories, constructs built on words and language. To resolve something that is imaginary is futile.

What makes us fearful is the stories about death. This fear comes from not knowing what will happen. But this awareness of not knowing projects an image of our self into an imagined future that has yet to come. This in itself is a process of the mind’s creation. The whole gamut of fearing the unknown, fueled by our fragmented past experiences, comes from mental constructs of a future that has no reality as yet.

Our narratives and stories are all that we have ever known about ourselves, filtered through words and language, knowledge, and experiences. These ideas are learned, taught, and conditioned – and they shape our experiences, which back up our narratives and stories. So they become very real for us. It is the nature of words to divide, parse out, reify everything into a thing. Once you label something, you make it into a thing and it becomes real for that person. When we divide up reality into birth and death, then we fear death and welcome birth. They define and shape our experience. This is why the Buddha said, “Dreams. Sentient beings are living in their dreams, dreams of their own construct.”

Words are useful. We need them to navigate through life. They can be creative and inspiring agents, shaping our life choices. That said, our reality is fluid, beyond constructs. It is inconceivable, where everything is wondrously interconnected and continues. Who says death is the “end?” Who says death is just “nothingness?” Why does it need to be reified into a thing? Everything changes and continues to morph through causes and conditions in wondrousness.

A Chan master once said that if you would like to know the realm of buddhahood, the realm of awakening, observe the times and seasons:

*Upon awakening,
morning spring is still chilly
winter is still cold.*

One meaning of this is that despite what we may think about it, the story we create, narrate, convince and share with others – things as they are, are still felt. The experiencing of this moment continues. You can narrate this moment to be cold, this moment to be chilly, pleasant, unpleasant, irrespective of this moment’s experience.

Someone once asked me “What’s the meaning of life?” I answered, “It’s not important what the meaning of life is, it’s important how we live our lives.” How we live our lives is experiencing this here and now. Since we are in this world of meaning, we make what life is and at the same time we should know that life is so much more beyond what limitations we place on it.

Perhaps I can add a stanza to the Chan poem above,

*Before awakening,
Spring gives way to summer
All nights turn to day.*

The significance of this poem is that things are not what we make them out to be, so fixed. However we may wish things to be otherwise, they change. Embracing impermanence is the principle of practice. Our connections with loved ones, friends, teachers, and life, with all of our feelings for them, do not “end” and cannot be defined into this or that. In our imagination, they end. But in reality, everything continues wondrously. This connection and continuity is love and wisdom. Love, without “other.” Wisdom, without “self.” What is there, then? Connectedness! Love means we cherish all whom we meet without reifying them into “things,” without othering them as separate, as different from us. At the same time, we don’t impose our self-referential opinions or ideas on them. This is to be without self. In

living our lives this way, we honor everyone including ourselves. And you will see that there is no end, but causes and conditions continue and our connections lead to other connections. Keep our stories and labels fluid; they help navigate our lives. But keep our feelings open, with possibility in sight. Strength lies in emotional openness.

Ten years ago, the most important person in my life passed away, my teacher Master Sheng Yen. I thought the world had ended. When I saw his shell lying on the bed, he was absent. Where was he? Who will be my teacher? I was thinking from my vantage point at the time. The truth is, he was everywhere and nowhere. He is in the blood that runs through my veins and in the teachings left behind; he is in the lives of all of his students, and mine. I see him teaching through my interactions with my students. By honoring him through my practice, we now have a meditation center, a large piece of property to expand into a community for the elderly practitioners, and small houses to convert into retreat dorms. He continues, and the world is continuing. I see him in the connections in all aspects of my life, yet he is nowhere for an “I” to grasp.

Death should not be made into an unchanging “thing,” a *prapañca*, a story we construct. But it can be an inspiration, a vow, to honor this moment with others, with love and wisdom. Our mornings may still be chilly and winters may still be cold, but seasons change and nights always bring on a brand new day. ☺

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