

# Loving and Dying



*Visuddhācāra*

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*Visuddhācāra*

*Illustrations by  
Hor Tuck Loon*

Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Centre  
355 Jalan Mesjid Negeri  
11600 Penang, Malaysia

*Sabbadānaṃ dhammadānaṃ jināti*  
The Gift of Dhamma excels all gifts

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CURBING ANGER SPREADING LOVE  
DRINKING TEA LIVING LIFE  
INVITATION TO VIPASSANA

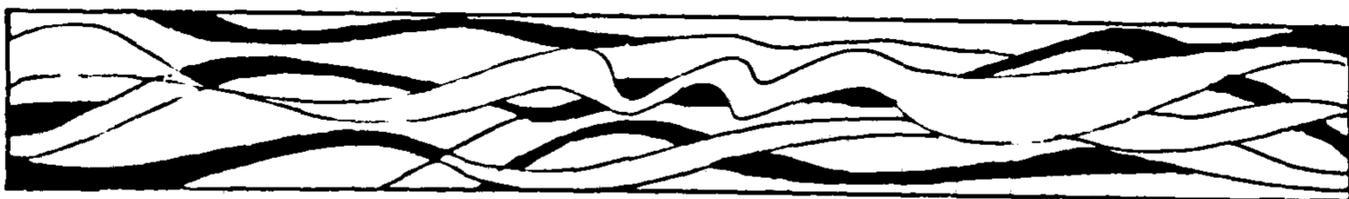
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*To Dr Lim Huat Bee  
Mr Lai Kuan Yew  
&  
Boo Chai  
to whom all  
I am particularly indebted,  
each in a certain way.*



*Just as one would look upon a bubble,  
just as one would look upon a mirage –  
if a person thus looks upon the world,  
the King of Death sees him not.*

*Dhammapada 170*

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.....

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Please note that throughout this book, wherever we say "he" in a general context, it should be taken to mean he or she. So too "him" would then mean him or her. "He" thus applies to both genders in such instances, as it would be awkward to use he/she, him/her all the time. No gender discrimination is, therefore, intended.

# PREFACE

.....

I have written this book to share some thoughts on death with anybody who may care to read it. Thoughts about how we can go about facing death - with courage and equanimity. With dignity. And if you like with a smile. Thoughts about how to cope with suffering, to live with wisdom and compassion, or with as much of it as we can muster, until we die.

But people generally do not like to talk about death. Whenever the subject is broached, they might start to feel uncomfortable. It is especially considered taboo on auspicious occasions such as a birthday or a New Year to talk about death. It is as if mentioning the word, *death*, on an auspicious occasion would mar that occasion and bring about bad luck or an earlier death! Of course, I do not agree with such notions. To me, it is just a superstition. I can understand, though, if people were to consider it bad taste to talk about death on auspicious occasions. But I think it is good and wise to reflect often on death and even on occasions such as a birthday or New Year, perhaps even more so on such occasions. Why? Because we can consider that we are not growing any younger but older, that each year brings us but one year closer to the grave. During such reflections we can take stock of our life, reassess our position and see whether we are going in the right direction – the direction of wisdom and compassion.

As a monk, I constantly meditate on death. It reminds me to lead a more meaningful life, not to waste my days away, though I must confess I still fritter away precious time from time to time;

for the mind, as you know, can be very stubborn and lazy at times. Nevertheless by frequent contemplation on death, I am reminded that I must find more time to practise insight meditation so I can clean my mind of the defilements of greed, hatred and delusion.

The Buddha advised us to contemplate often on death, as often as daily or every now and then. It will arouse in us *samvega* - the sense of urgency to strive harder to eradicate the suffering that comes from a defiled and deluded mind. I like to talk about death. It's my favourite subject. (Am I morbid? It's all right. Go ahead. You can say I'm morbid and whatever you like. It's fine with me. I don't mind. People, ie. not only me but also you, must be allowed their basic human right to express their views and feelings as long as they do so in a legitimate, sensitive, non-imposing and non-violent way. No one should get angry with a person on account of his expressing his views in such manner, though unfortunately, sometimes we forget and get all heated up.) But coming back to the subject, I have always pondered, I have always wondered and am still wondering: *Why do we live? Why do we die? What is it all about? What is it all for? To what purpose? For what end?*

Many answers have been proffered, no doubt. And I'm sure there are many people who would be happy to offer me answers to these questions that have been asked ever since man began to think and ponder. But I cannot say I have been satisfied with all the answers that have been given. I am still seeking. These days I have become a Buddhist monk and taken up meditation. I subscribe to the Buddha's five precepts of not killing or harming, not stealing or cheating, not committing sexual misconduct such as adultery, not lying, and not taking alcohol and drugs. As a monk though I observe, in addition, celibacy and other rules for monks.

I cannot say I have as yet found all the answers to my questions, but I have found some solace, some comfort in the Buddha's dispensation. I can relate to the Buddha's teaching of mindfulness and loving-kindness. And I'm still meditating. Perhaps I might find all the answers one day. It will be nice if I can. But if I could not, it also doesn't matter. What matters is that I have tried. I will be glad even if I were to die trying. For at least I have tried. That way my life would still be meaningful, at least to a certain extent. And along the way, of course, I will try to spread as much good cheer and happiness according to my disposition and ability.

I have tried in this book to share my limited understanding of life and death. I feel that we need to discuss the question of death frankly. We should not be afraid to bring up the subject. Otherwise, how can we discuss and learn? When we can openly discuss and learn and understand, then it is good; for we can come to terms with death. We can know better how to deal with it. This is important; for the simple reason that all of us must die. There is no escape. And if we cannot relate to death now, how can we relate to it when we are lying on our deathbed, about to breathe our last? Might we not be overcome with fear and confusion then? So it's better to learn all about death now. It will surely stand us in good stead. Then we need not fear anymore. We'll have confidence, and when death comes we can go with a smile. We can say: "Death, do your worst. I know you and I can smile."

I have written this book in a forthright and engaging a manner as possible. I have tried not to be too academic or stilted. I wanted you to enjoy reading this book, to chuckle over those parts that might elicit a chuckle, and to pick up a thing or two which you might find helpful in living, loving and dying. Also I have written not so much as from a monk to a layperson but as from

one human being to another human being. So I have written quite freely with the purpose of communicating, of reaching out to the heart. Though I cannot say how far I have succeeded or flopped! Only you will be the best judge of that.

As I'm a Buddhist monk, readers will find that the contents contain a lot of Buddhist values and concepts. Of course, some values, such as that of love and compassion, are universal. They belong to no one religion but to all. All religions teach love and compassion. They are all good religions. But it's we, the followers, who do not follow. So we kill and maim and hurt in the name of religion. Who's to be blamed but ourselves! Not the religions or their founders who always preached love, wisdom, mercy, forgiveness and compassion. If we can awaken to our ignorance, then we can love truly. We can live as brothers and sisters with tolerance, patience and understanding, with love and compassion.

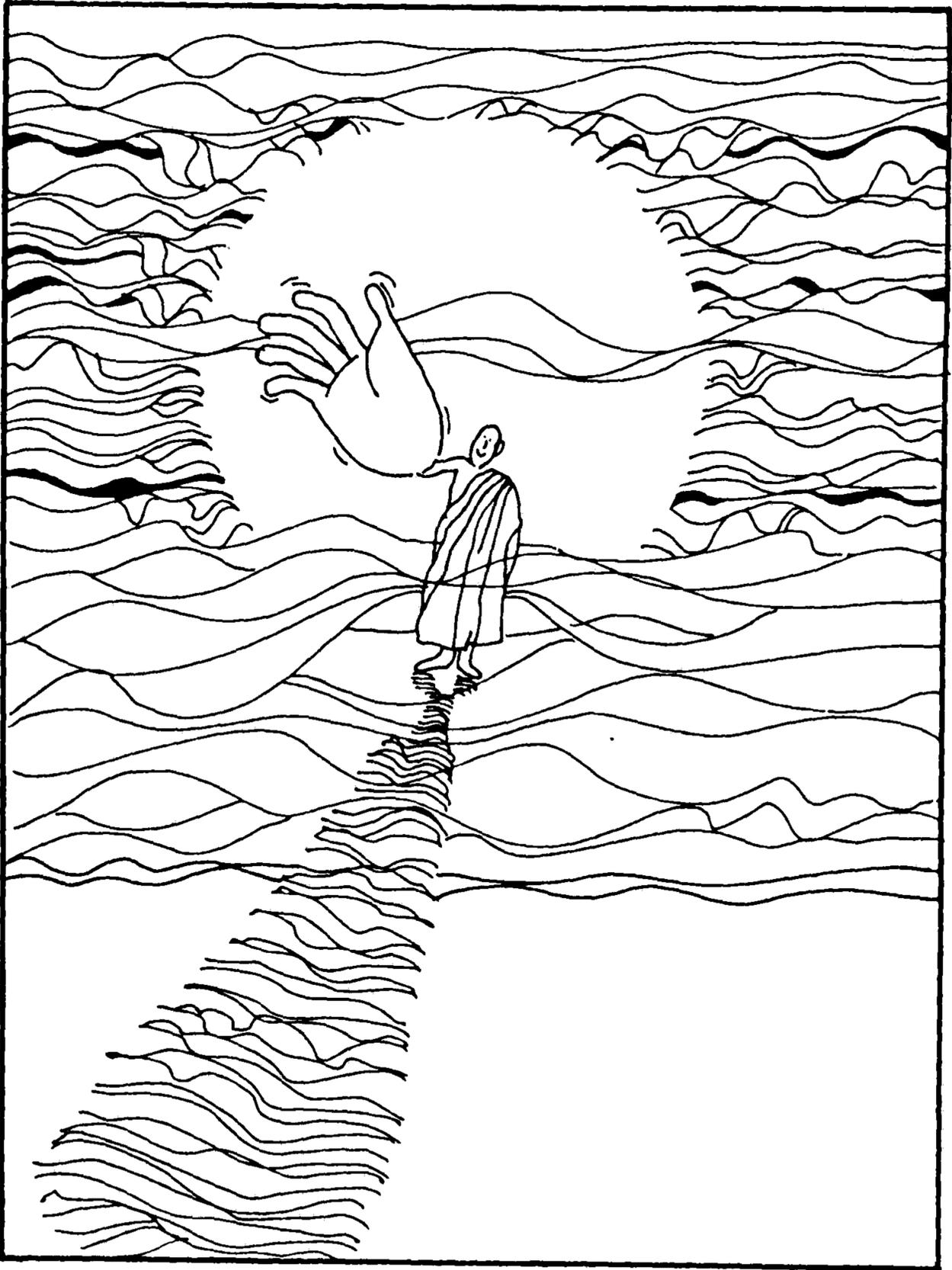
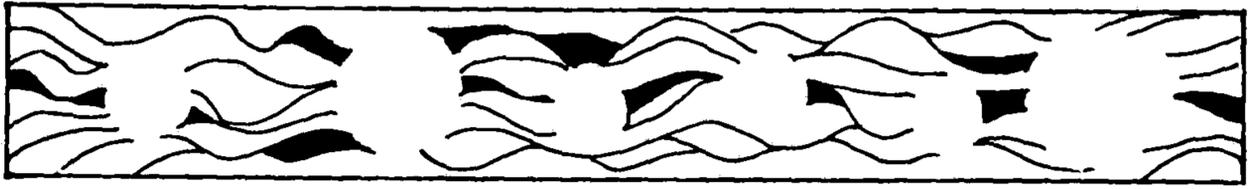
I wrote this book mainly for Buddhists. But non-Buddhists too might read and find some benefit, some common areas of agreement, appreciation and understanding. At the very least, they would know the Buddhist point of view, the Buddhist approach and understanding. It's good to know each other's viewpoints; it leads to more tolerance, understanding and appreciation of each other's approaches and beliefs. There is no desire on my part at all to convert anybody. That should be very clear. Let everybody practise their own religion and let them do so well; for as has been well put by Nobel peace laureate, the Dalai Lama, compassion is, after all, the essence of all religions.

I have tried to share my understanding to the best of my ability. But I have no doubt that there will be some shortcomings here and there. Or some areas where there may be differences of interpretation or understanding. You may not like or agree with certain things I say. Or you may not like the way I put it. You

might think it is improper, flippant, insensitive, sentimental, abrasive, distorted, absurd, or whatever. It is all right. This is natural. As long as there are even two persons, there will be some disagreements. You can just reject those things you do not agree with, throw them out, so to speak. You need not have to accept everything I say. Why should you? Of course you have a good mind of your own, and you can (and must) think and decide for yourself. We can agree to disagree, without getting upset or angry. We can agree to disagree and still remain good friends. Can we not? That is the most wonderful thing, the quintessence of mental maturity. It is for each of us to decide sincerely and honestly for ourselves what we can relate to and what we cannot. We need not believe everything or anything.

The Buddha himself said it's better that we carefully consider, investigate and verify for ourselves before accepting anything. Even the Buddha's own words too should come under the same intensity of scrutiny. After all, the Buddha made no exception whatsoever. He never believed in blind faith. He never told us to simply believe what he said and to simply reject what others said. But he told us to investigate, practise and verify for ourselves. If we find that a certain teaching is good, that it is wholesome and leads to the eradication of greed, hatred and delusion, then we can accept it. If not, we should reject it. It's excellent advice. And, therefore, taking a cue from the Buddha, I always like to say: Believe nothing. But think, practise and verify for yourself. That's to me the best and safest approach. But as for any mistakes on my part in the writing of this book, I do apologise and ask for forgiveness.

May all beings be happy. May we all find the wisdom and happiness that we seek, each in our own way. And happy reading!



HELLO  
DEATH  
GOODBYE  
LIFE

.....

*One* day when I die, as I must, I'd like to die with a smile on my lips. I'd like to go peacefully, to greet death like a friend, to be able to say quite cheerfully: "Hello Death, Goodbye Life."

I can imagine myself having a conversation with death. Perhaps it might go this way: "Hello Death! How are you? I have been waiting for you a long time. All my life I have been anticipating you. Are you coming for me at long last? Is it time for me to go already?"

"Yes, yes, Death I am coming. Be patient. I'm ready. Can't you see I am smiling? Since a long time ago I have been planning to welcome you with a smile. Yes, Death, I understand. You don't have to apologise. I know you've got a job to do. I hold nothing against you. No hard feelings. It's nothing personal, I understand.

"As I have said, Death, all my life I have been waiting for this moment. To see whether I can meet you with a smile. To see whether I could, at least, inspire in death, if not in life. You are now giving me this opportunity and I thank you for it.

"Yes, I have heard a lot about you. That you wait for no man.

That you come like a thief in the night. That you'll bargain with nobody. That you'll not take *no* for an answer.

“Death, it's all right. I'll come with you gladly. I'm tired. This body is like a broken shell. It had seen better days. It has outlived its use and time. As you can see I'm already almost dead. And I have been enduring all this pain, trying to smile at all these many visitors calling on me. Death, to tell you the truth, you should have come earlier. After all the pain, you are a welcome respite, like a godsend. But enough of this talk. Death, let's not dally. Let's go. Come, hold my hand.”

And I'd go, as I have always dreamt, with a smile on my lips. What a beautiful way to die! All the people who have gathered around me need not cry. They can be happy because they can see I'm smiling. They'll know that I'm all right. Death is nothing to be afraid of. Treat death like a friend. Be ever ready to say hello to death and goodbye to life.

o o o o o

*O*f course no one is spared from death. All of us have to die. As the Buddha said: *Life is uncertain but death is certain*. While we live we suffer the separation that comes with the death of a loved one. Both my grandparents have died. I do not remember my grandfather. He died when I was very young. But I do remember my grandmother. She was very kind to me. She was also very poor. She preferred to live in the countryside while my parents resided in town. I remember once when she visited us, I asked her for five cents. She immediately took out her purse, dug out five cents and gave it to me. In those days, there was purchasing power even in five cents: you could get an ice-ball or a glass of iced drink with five cents. If you drink the coconut water served

by the Indian man you could even have two glasses for five cents! And for five cents too you could get five sweets.

My father died when I was 10. I remember visiting him for the last time one night at the General Hospital as he lay there dying from tuberculosis and other complications. I remember my mother telling him: "Ah Beh, this is your son Johnny come to see you." My father couldn't speak. He had an oxygen tube inserted in his nose. He seemed to look at me weakly. I was young. I didn't know what death was about then, though I know better now. My poor mother suffered the most. She had seen so many deaths and had a most difficult life from young. Definitely, life was no bed of roses for her.

One of my brothers died while still a baby. Another died at 23 together with his fiancée. It was tragic. They drowned. I can still remember seeing their bodies in the mortuary. My mother was wailing her heart out. It was very painful for her to lose a beloved son in such a tragic way. I was quite stunned and just didn't know what to make out of it all. I was 16 then. I tried to appear nonchalant, casual. I kept away the tears. I spoke and behaved as if nothing had happened, as if death was to me an everyday affair, and there was no need to grieve. I made light of it, trying to put on a cool exterior.

But in private I cried. I cried bitterly. And after the funeral I went back to the cemetery. I cycled there with a cangkul. I dug the ground and planted flowers around the grave of my brother and his beloved's. I carved on his wooden cross the words: *Greater love than this no man hath that he should lay down his life for his friend*, as he had died while trying to save his fiancée. And I spoke to God. I asked Him: "Lord, why do you do this to me? Why do you take away my brother? Is it your will, your desire? Then if it is, let your will be done. I accept it." For you see,

I was a good Christian then. And God's will must precede all others. It must not be questioned. Though as a Buddhist now, I believe I understand a little better. Yes, no God took away my brother. If we accept life we must accept death. Death is part and parcel of life. As the Buddha said, it is ignorance that makes the world of suffering go round, and we fare on from life to life according to our deeds. Good begets good and bad begets bad. I must confess I can relate better to the Buddha's way of looking at things.

Later in life I saw more deaths. As a journalist, I had seen bodies – people who died from accidents, gang-fights, suicides, *samsu* poisoning, etc. I wrote dramatic, touching or tragic stories about how people died. There was the man who kissed his little daughter goodbye and then shot himself in the head. Then there was a young couple who was found in a suicide pact on a hotel bed. The girl died from the poison they took; her boyfriend survived. And there was the notorious robber gunned down by police on a New Year's day. He was a marked man, who could not live to see the end of the first day of a new year. But for me it was just another story. I never thought very deeply about death then. I was quite numbed by it all. All I wanted was to get the best story for the front page of the newspaper. There was little feeling or compassion in me for the poor victims. I was quite a hard-hearted and selfish person then, just interested in my own well-being.

Still much later on, as a monk, I encountered deaths – this time with more feeling and compassion. When I visited the sick, I could feel sympathy for them. I tried as best as I could to console. To the Buddhists, I recited the suttas, the Buddhist scriptures. I told them what the Buddha said: *The body may be sick but let not the mind be sick.* We may not be able to do much for the body but

we can do something about the mind. We can keep it steady even when we are sick. We can be mindful. We can watch the rise and fall of the pain, how it comes and goes in waves. We can understand the nature of suffering. We can meet it and learn from it. It is there as a test – of how well we have understood the nature of life, how well we have understood that there is no permanent self here but only constant change of arising and passing away, like the ceaseless flowing of a river; how well we have understood that it is our ignorance, craving, attachment, anger, fear, etc, that are the cause of our suffering.

In that understanding, we can rise up to meet the pain. We can take it in our stride. We can remain calm and cool. Without even the slightest bit of depression. Yes, we can smile, even at our pain. We can say: “Hey pain, you are really trying to do me in. Are you not? Another person might succumb to you but not me. I have been training and steeling myself for you. The Buddha teaches that I should respond without anger or aversion. So I’m trying to respond to you now without anger or aversion. I understand that with mindfulness and peace in my heart, I can rise above you. I can smile at you. You teach me that life is suffering. But you also teach me that I can rise above you.” And you can smile at the pain. You will feel immediately better.

o o o o o

*Life is mostly froth and bubble,  
Two things stand like stone,  
Kindness in another's trouble,  
Courage in your own.*

Adam Gordon

# TWO RESOLUTIONS

.....

*As* I'm writing now, I recall that just yesterday a fellow monk died. He had been suffering from terminal cancer for eight months. When I was by his side at the hospital a few days before his death, he was in pain. I tried to feed him some broth but he could not eat. He looked quite gaunt and grim. He could hardly speak. The cancer had ravaged his body and it was no easy task for his mind to bear up. I urged him to note or observe the pain as he would do in normal meditation, to remain as calm and equanimous as possible. He was a staunch meditator and I am sure he meditated to the very end.

I remember another occasion when I visited a kind old man who had leukemia. He too was in pain. It showed on his face. There were beads of sweat on his forehead and face. I took a towel and gently wiped away his sweat. I whispered into his ear and tried to soothe him. This man too was a meditator and again I reminded him to maintain mindfulness, to observe the pain as calmly as possible. I was happy when the look of pain disappeared from his face. Shortly after, his relatives came and I left him. A few hours later he died. I was glad I was able to help him a little before he expired.

Although there is happiness in life, there is also suffering. The happiness seems so fleeting – gone in no time only to be replaced by sorrow and discontent. Life itself, because it ends in

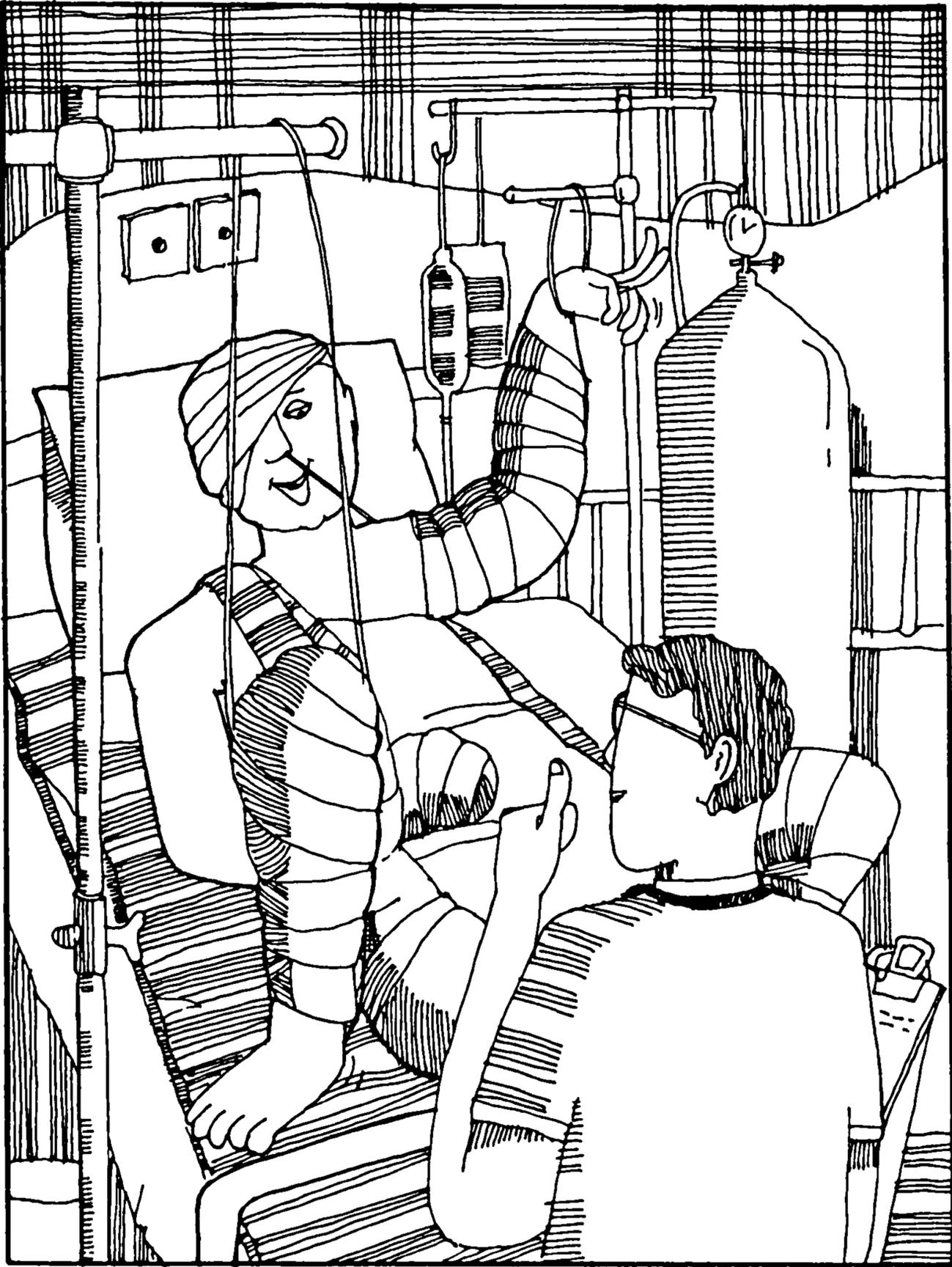
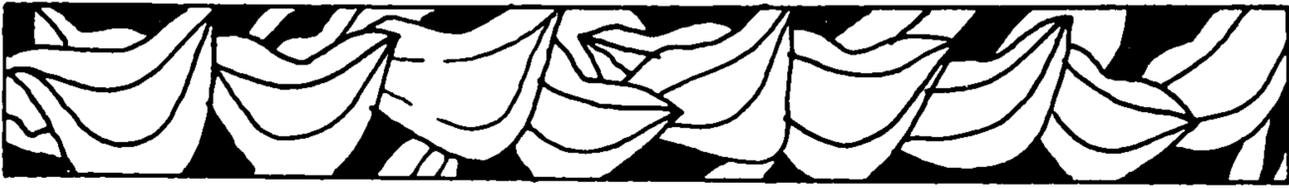
death, is a tragedy. Someone once said life is like an onion: you peel it crying. The Buddha says birth is suffering because it leads inevitably to decay and death. We should understand this well. If we accept life we must accept death. If we want to cry when somebody dies, then we should also cry at his birth. For the moment a baby is born the seed of death is in him. But we are happy when a child is born. We laugh and we congratulate the parents. If we understand birth – that it must lead to death – then when death comes we should be able to face it with a smile.

Seeing how people die in pain, their body wracked by disease, and seeing how all life must end in death (a fact that is driven home to me every time I went for funeral chanting), two resolutions arose in my mind: First, when the time comes for me to die, I want to die with a smile on my lips. I want to be able to be very mindful and serene. In other words I want to keep my wits about me. I want to be able to smile at my pain no matter how excruciating it may be. I want to be able to smile at all the visitors that may call on me. I want to be able to smile at all the kind doctors and nurses who attend upon me. I want to be able to smile at my fellow patients and to help in whatever way I can in the hospital, whether to inspire or to console.

Instead of the doctors and nurses asking me how I am, I want to ask them: "How are you doc? How are you sister? How is your day today? You know, you are doing a great job. We are very lucky to have you. Please keep up the good work. Thank you very much!" And to my Buddhist visitors, I will speak Dhamma.\* I'll say: Look at me. I'm half-dead. Finished! You know, it's not easy to meditate when you are half-dead. So while you are still healthy,

---

\* Dhamma is what is. It is seeing things as they are. It is the teaching of the Buddha. The Buddha, in effect, taught: "Life is suffering but I have found the way out of this suffering, and I will show it to you." And the Buddha exhorted the people to practise generosity, morality and meditation.



*Hello Doc, how are you?*

make the most of it. Meditate! Practise the Dhamma! Have no regrets later. Don't wait until you become fatally ill. It will be too late then. But if you have been doing your meditation practice now, then when you fall sick it won't be so difficult to face the pain. You can observe and even transcend it.

You know, the Buddha tells us that everything is impermanent. If we meditate hard enough, we can understand the fact of impermanence more deeply, such that we will not be so attached to this mind and body. We will know for certain that *this body is not ours; this mind too is not ours*. Understanding, we will be able to let go. We will not be so attached to the gross sensual pleasures of life. We can live more wisely. We can grow old gracefully. And we need not fear death.

The Buddha says suffering is inherent in life. And we must learn how to live with it and to transcend it. Only by applying mindfulness in our daily life and by meditating can we penetrate the truth of suffering. When we have understood suffering deeply, we will strive to remove the cause of it, which is our craving, our attachment to life, to the sensual lure of pleasant sights, pleasant sounds, pleasant smell, pleasant tastes and pleasant touch. We will try to purify our mind and heart of all defilements.

According to the Buddha, when our mind is purified of greed, hatred and delusion, we will overcome all suffering. We will never again respond with attachment or aversion to anything. Instead there will be only wisdom and compassion in us. Just this is the end of suffering. Clinging no more we can never suffer. Even physical pain brings no mental suffering as the mind does not respond with aversion or anger. The mind can be calm and peaceful. There is acceptance and understanding. And when we die with this kind of wisdom and peace, the Buddha says that will

be the end of suffering. No more rebirth, no more coming back to this cycle of birth and death. If we do not take on any new birth, there will be no decay and death together with its attendant suffering. Finished! The curtain falls! This mass of suffering is extinguished. And we can then say, just as the saints of old had said, *Done is what is to be done. Lived is the holy life.*

Of course, right now we may still be far from the goal. But as they say, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. So I'm an optimist. Yes, I'm a Buddhist and an optimist. (Who says a Buddhist is a pessimist?) And I believe that every step we take on the path of mindfulness shall bring us one step closer to the goal – the goal of Nibbana, the end of all suffering. And being an optimist, I like to think that we will reach it sooner than later.

### *Saying it with flowers too*

And so as I'm lying on my hospital bed, I'd like to speak Dhamma to all those who call on me, or to anybody who cares to listen. And furthermore, I can send flowers to all my friends out there. I might include a card with a message that can go something like this: "Hello there! How are you? Do you like these flowers? Are they not beautiful? Do you have time to pause and appreciate the beauty of a flower and breathe in its fragrance? And when you look at a flower, do you also see the shining eyes of your loved one or your child? And do you feel and understand their hopes and their fears? Or are you too busy, too preoccupied with your own worldly plans and ambitions, your pursuit of fame and wealth?"

"Have you considered well the nature of impermanence, my friend – how all must fade and die? And how, while we are alive, we ought to live meaningfully so as to have no regrets later. By

the way, like the flower that is fading, I too am dying. But I'm sending you good wishes. May you be well and happy! I hope you do find time for your loved ones and for the practice of meditation. You know, making money, acquiring luxuries, enjoying sensual pleasures is not everything. They may feel good for a while, but actually being kind and loving is more important: it will give you more satisfaction and happiness. Forgive me for preaching such platitudes but do give some heed to the words of a dying person. Allow him to say his piece. Yes, while you are alive, you should try to spread as much good cheer and happiness as possible. Forgive everybody. Do not harbour any grudges or consider anybody your enemies. Always remember, life is short and soon we will all be dead. And love is giving, not taking. Love gives without attaching any conditions. Love expects no return. Try to cultivate this beautiful kind of love. Be happy!" And I'll end with a *PS* – "Take good care. You need not visit me. But you can be happy for me. For I'm smiling and I'm happy that I can die with a smile on my lips. Cheerio and good luck!"

And if I could not speak because I was too ill, then still I could smile to show that everything was fine, that the disease was only getting my body and not my mind. In that way one can inspire even when one is ill. People might then appreciate the Dhamma more and practise even harder. Of course, if I am addressing my non-Buddhist friends, I must not impose my religious views upon them. I can express my views but in no way must I impose it upon them. Just as I would not want them to impose their views on me, so too must I not impose my views on them. We must give due respect to each other's religious views and have loving-kindness for each other. In this way, there will be peaceful co-existence.

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# COPING WITH DISEASE - THE RIGHT ATTITUDE

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*We* should not look on disease and suffering as something which will destroy us completely, and thereby giving in to despair and despondency. On the contrary, we (ie. in the case of Buddhists) can look upon it as a test of how well we have understood the Buddha's teachings, how well we can apply the understanding we have supposedly learnt. If we cannot cope mentally, if we break down, it shows our understanding of the Dhamma, our practice, is still weak. So, in this way, it is a test and an opportunity for us to see how well we have mastered our practice.

Then also, disease is an opportunity for us to further enhance our practice of patience and tolerance. How can we practise and develop *paramis*\* (perfections) such as patience if we are not tested, if we are not put under difficult and severe conditions? So,

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\* The ten paramis are giving, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, resolution, loving-kindness and equanimity. All bodhisattas (ie. those aspiring to be Buddhas) have to cultivate these paramis. All Buddhists have to cultivate these paramis to a certain degree too before they can gain enlightenment under the dispensation of a Buddha.

in this way, we can look at the disease as an opportunity for us to cultivate more patience.

We can also look at health as not just the mere absence of disease but the capacity to experience a disease, and to learn and grow from it. Yes, such a novel definition of health comes from certain medical experts, such as Dr Paul Pearsall, of the Sinai Hospital, Detroit, USA. Seeing how disease can never be completely eradicated and how we have eventually to succumb in one way or another, these doctors have come up with a definition of health that can help us to adjust to disease when it comes. It is true, isn't it? – that no matter how many sophisticated machines, procedures and drugs we may come up with, people still succumb to cancer, AIDS, heart disease and a host of other ailments. Ultimately there is no escape. We have to understand and accept the fact, so that when it comes and we have to go down, we can go down gracefully. No doubt, we will treat the disease as best we can, but when despite our best efforts, we fail and the disease continues to progress, we have to accept and reconcile with the inevitable.

In the final analysis, it is not how long we live but how *well* we live that counts, and that includes how well we can accept our disease, and finally how well we can die. In this regard, Dr Bernie S. Siegel, in his book, *Peace, Love & Healing*, wrote:

Exceptional patients don't try not to die. They try to live until they die. Then they are successes, no matter what the outcome of their disease, because they have healed their lives, even if they have not cured their diseases.

And he also said:

A successful life is not about dying. It is about living well. I have known two-year-olds and nine-year-olds who have

changed people and even entire communities by their ability to love, and their lives were successful though short. On the other hand, I have known many who lived much longer and left behind nothing but emptiness.

So it can be quite wonderful after all that our life can be healed even though our diseases may not be cured. How? Because suffering is a teacher and if we learn our lesson well, we can become surprisingly better persons. Have we not heard accounts of how people after having gone through great suffering, emerged changed and better persons? If they had been impatient, selfish, arrogant and thoughtless before, they might become more patient, kind, gentle and humble. Sometimes they remarked that the disease was a good thing for them – it gave them an opportunity to reconsider their lifestyle and the more important values in life. They come to appreciate their family and friends more, and they now value the time they spend with their loved ones. And if they were to recover, they would find more time for their loved ones, and to do the things that are really more important and meaningful.

But even if we were to succumb to the disease we can still learn and grow from it. We could understand the precariousness of life and how true the Buddha's teaching was – that there is an essential flaw in life. We could become kinder and more appreciative of the kindness we have received from people. We could forgive those who had hurt us. We could love more richly, more deeply. And when death comes, we can die with acceptance and peace. In this way, we can say that our life is healed because we are reconciled with the world and we are at peace.

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## *We can meditate*

When we are sick and bedridden, we need not despair. We can meditate even when we are in bed. We can observe our mind and body. We can obtain calmness and strength by doing breathing meditation. We can observe our in-breath and out-breath, knowing as we breath in and out. This can give us a calming effect. Or we can observe the rising and falling of the abdomen as we breath in and out. Our mind can follow the rising and falling, and become, as it were, one with it. This too can give us calmness. And from such calmness, understanding can arise. We might see the transient and dissolutary nature of all phenomena, and be able to reconcile with the fact of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and no-self. If we have learnt mindfulness or Vipassana\* meditation, we can pass our time quite easily. There are many objects we can observe in any posture, whether lying down, sitting, walking or standing. We can know our posture as it is, and feel the sensations that arise in our body. We can observe them with a steady and calm mind. And, of course, the mind is also a subject for observation. So we can also observe the states of our mind. All can be observed – sadness, depression, restlessness, worry, thoughts – and they would all pass, giving way to equanimity, peace and wisdom. Wholesome and unwholesome states will come and go. We will be able to watch them all with understanding and equanimity.

Sometimes we can radiate *metta* (loving-kindness). Again and again we can wish for all beings:

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\* Vipassana is Insight or Mindfulness meditation. In Vipassana, meditators employ mindfulness to observe the nature of mental and physical phenomena, perceiving eventually their characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and no-self. For a simple introduction to Vipassana, and the practice of another kind of meditation, called *metta* or loving-kindness meditation, see *Invitation to Vipassana and Curbing Anger Spreading Love* both written by the same writer and published by the Malaysian Buddhist Meditation Centre, Penang.

*May all beings be well and happy.  
May they be free from harm and danger.  
May they be free from mental suffering.  
May they be free from physical suffering.  
May they take care of themselves happily.\**

In this way too, we can pass our time quite happily even if we are bedridden. We can radiate metta to the doctors, nurses and fellow-patients. We can also send our metta to our loved ones, relatives and friends. Moreover, we can reflect on the Dhamma from time to time, recollect what we have read, heard or understood. Reflecting thus, we can respond to our suffering with wisdom and equanimity.

The instruction of the Buddha was to cultivate the mind, to meditate, and to do so even when we are sick. In fact, it is at such times that we need to make even more effort to summon up our mindfulness. Who knows, *Nibbana* or the highest wisdom, may be attained even as we breath our last! In the scriptures, the Buddha cited the case of a person who was sick – afflicted with painful bodily feelings, grievous, sharp, racking, distracting, discomfoting that drained the life away. But that person was not disheartened. He felt *samvega* – a sense of urgency to strive even in his last hours. “He makes effort accordingly,” the Buddha said. “His mind being intent on Nibbana, he realizes with his own person the supreme truth, he sees it by penetrating it with wisdom.”

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\* Details on the practice of metta meditation can be found in the book, *Curbing Anger Spreading Love*. See footnote on page 16.

*True it is, true it is, householder, that you are sick; your body is weak and cumbered. For one carrying this body about, householder, to claim but a moment's health would be sheer foolishness. Wherefore, householder, thus you should train yourself: "Though my body is sick, my mind shall not be sick." Thus householder, must you train yourself.*

Buddha

# TRIBUTE TO KUI CHAN

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I'd like to tell you about a brave yogi who died peacefully from lung cancer with the word, Nibbana, on her lips. Her name is Kuai Chan and she passed away on December 18, 1992 at her home in Kuala Lumpur. She was 43. Her husband, Billy, told me how she coped with the disease. Finding the account most inspiring, especially for yogis (meditators), I asked him for permission to relate it in this book, and I thank him for agreeing to it.

Kuai Chan was first diagnosed with breast cancer in April 1989. At that time she had already practised Vipassana meditation for about a year. She took the diagnosis calmly. "My wife accepted that it was her kamma,"\* said Billy. "She did not blame anybody or anything. She was not bitter nor did she fall into any depression. She was remarkably steady and remained quite so till her death." Kuai Chan underwent an operation to remove the affected breast. Then after three months she had to be

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\* Kamma is the natural law of cause and effect, or action and result. It works on the principle that good begets good and bad begets bad. So if we have done something bad in a previous life, the result of the evil deed may take place in this life. For example, one who kills a lot, will, if reborn as a human, have a short life. For a good explanation of kamma see *The Buddha and his Teachings* by Narada, Buddhist Missionary Society (BMS), Malaysia; Pg 333ff.

operated upon again when the cancer cells were found to be still growing in the area. After that she underwent radio- and chemotherapy with minimal side-effects. Throughout her treatment for her breast cancer, and in the last six months of her life after she was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, she declined to take any pain medication. "She didn't want any painkillers," said Billy. "Even when the pain was excruciating, she refused to take any paindrugs, not even a panadol. She was a very determined person, very strong and admirable."

Her decision to go without the pain medication was because she wanted to keep her mind as clear and alert as possible. She was a yogi, and all yogis value their mindfulness. They wouldn't want any drugs that can dull their mind and impair their meditation. So if they can take on the pain they would do so. Kuai Chan was prepared to face the pain, so she declined the painkillers. She only agreed to the radio- and chemo-therapy for her breast cancer because they might have led to a cure. But later when she had lung cancer and was told that it was terminal, she declined the radio- and chemo-therapy recommended by a hospital for alleviating her suffocation. And when a doctor offered to administer pain medication, such as morphine, she rejected it too.

Billy said that in her first bout with the breast cancer, Kuai Chan had little problem with the pain she felt after the operation. As a yogi, she was able to note the pain quite well and it would disappear. But the lung cancer was a real ordeal for her. The pain was terribly acute at times but still she refused drugs. There were times she just collapsed and lay prostrate on the floor when the pain struck. But still she held on. She also had a wracking cough which persisted for many days and nights. Billy was by her side and when she could not sleep night after night, he tried to soothe

her pain and cough by rubbing ointment, massaging and other traditional remedies. He took her to see Chinese physicians and obtained many kinds of herbs and brewed them for her to drink.

Billy said it was Kuai Chan's faith and meditation that enabled her to face her suffering with a remarkable degree of serenity and composure. Both of them had meditated with Venerable Sujiva at a Retreat in Taiping in 1988. Subsequently Kuai Chan continued to attend regular Retreats at the Venerable's *Santisukharama* hermitage at Kota Tinggi, Johor.

When she was diagnosed with lung cancer after a coughing spell in July 1992, the doctor gave her one month to live. Showing Kuai Chan and Billy the x-ray, he pointed out how the cancer had spread all over the lungs. He even expressed surprise that Kuai Chan could still be walking around and looking quite healthy, given the condition of her cancer-ravaged lungs. But the doctor didn't know that Kuai Chan had a mind of steel. She survived for six months. For her then it was not so much a battle to stay alive as to die with dignity. When she and Billy saw me at the Wisdom Centre in Petaling Jaya where I was visiting in July, they asked what could they do. I told them: What could a yogi do but meditate! If I were her I would meditate to the very end, I said. They were encouraged and Kuai Chan was determined then to spend the rest of her days meditating in her home. Billy said he would support her all the way.

But she didn't reckon the pain could be so terrible. She told Billy she never knew there could be such pain. It was especially severe in her lower back, burning and cutting into her. She summoned all her mental strength to note the pain but still she would lose out. It was too much. There were times when she could only lay there helpless without being able to note the pain anymore. She was sheerly enduring. But she would not take any

paindrugs. She consulted her meditation teacher Ven Sujiva who advised her to do metta (loving-kindness) and in-breath out-breath meditation to soothe the pain when she could not tolerate it anymore. This gave her some relief. Coming out from such relief, she could continue her vipassana meditation. One day after three weeks of battling with persistent pain, she had a unique experience. She told Billy that while noting the sharp pain, she observed it becoming finer and finer until it vividly disappeared. She said she felt as if all her senses were cut off, as if there was no *nama-rupa* (mind and body) at that moment, that her mind and body had disappeared together with the pain. She told Billy she felt that this was like a Nibbanic experience, and she felt a great joy came over her. After that experience, she never encountered that kind of excruciating pain anymore.

Ten days before her end, Billy admitted her to a private hospital as she was having difficulty breathing. The doctors put her on oxygen. X-rays showed that the cancer cells had spread further, aggravating the suffocation. That was when radio- and chemo-therapy was suggested, not as a possible cure but merely to alleviate the condition. But Kuai Chan didn't want her mind to lose its clarity, and so rejected the suggestion. After five days she asked Billy to take her home as she felt there was no longer any reason for her to stay in the hospital. Billy installed an oxygen tank in their home, took her back and put her on the oxygen to alleviate her breathing difficulty. For the next five days from December 13 to her death on Dec. 18, she seemed to be in some kind of sleep, waking up only now and then. Two days before her death, she could still remember her daughter's 17th birthday which fell on Dec. 17. She reminded Billy to boil two eggs for their daughter and to give her a red packet, which he did.

On Dec. 18 she woke up at about 9am with a smile. She asked:

“Have I been sleeping?” Billy replied: “Yes, it’s been five days already. Don’t you know?” She was surprised. She appeared happy and was smiling. She said she didn’t need to take herbal medicines anymore. She again remembered her daughter’s birthday, and although Billy told her he had already given their daughter a red packet as instructed, she told him again: “Give her another ang-pow on my behalf.”

At about 2pm, Billy said, Kuai Chan tried to say something to him but was too weak to speak. Billy reminded her to maintain a detached frame of mind, not to worry about him and the children, and to feel free to go peacefully. He said they had discussed this many times before, that if she should be cured it is good; but if that is not possible, it is all right also: she should be able to go gracefully, understanding the law of kamma, that all of us must separate one day.

At 3pm when her son, aged 15, returned from school and announced to her: “Mother, I am back,” she understood although she could not speak. She nodded her head to indicate that she knew.

At about 3.30pm, Billy said, Kuai Chan managed with some effort to say very distinctly in Cantonese, *Woh yap niphoon*, which literally means “I have entered Nibbana,” which means to say she believed she had realized or experienced Nibbana. And she pointed to her abdomen. That was her last words, and she passed away peacefully about 45 minutes later. Billy said Kuai Chan, in her meditation, usually observed the rising and falling motion of the abdomen that occurred with every in- and out-breath. She found the abdominal rising and falling a good object to place her mind upon, and she used to encourage other yogis to stick to that object too. Whatever phenomena in the body or mind one applies one’s mindfulness and concentration upon, one would

eventually see the arising and dissolution of the phenomena and come to understand their impermanence, unsatisfactory and no-self nature. Such understanding can climax in the attainment of Nibbana, a state of cessation of suffering. Defilements of greed, hatred and delusion are totally eradicated when Nibbana is experienced at the arahant level.\*

Billy said that as her end approached, Kuai Chan's face took on a kind of radiance, and when she spoke, her eyes were bright and clear. At about 4.15pm, Billy noticed that she had stopped breathing. "She looked very peaceful, very serene. She passed away very peacefully," said Billy.

At about 4pm that day, a Dhamma friend, Lily, who was staying about 25 km away in Petaling Jaya, had a sudden desire to radiate metta (loving-kindness) to Kuai Chan. Lily sat down to meditate, sending out thoughts of metta to Kuai Chan. And she said she had a "crystal-clear" vision of Kuai Chan, who looked serene. When she stopped her meditation, she looked at the clock. It was 4.15pm, at about the same time Kuai Chan had passed away.

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\* As an experience of the cessation of conditioned phenomena during meditation, Nibbana can be experienced at four stages of sainthood. Although the experience of Nibbana as cessation of conditioned phenomena is the same at all four stages, Nibbana having only one "taste," that is the "taste" of peace, the results in terms of eradication of mental defilements are, however, different at each of the four stages.

At the first stage of a *sotapanna* (stream-winner), greed and hatred are dramatically weakened but not totally eliminated. These two defilements have been weakened to the extent that the *sotapanna* could no more break the five precepts of not killing (even an insect), not stealing or cheating, not committing sexual misconduct such as adultery, not lying, and not taking alcohol and drugs. At the second stage of a *sakadagami* (once-returner), the defilements are further weakened. At the third stage of an *anagami* (non-returner), sensual desire and hatred/anger are completely eliminated. But there is still a subtle trace of ignorance and desire of a non-sensual nature, ie. desire for rebirth in the non-sensual brahma heavenly realm. At the fourth stage of an *arahant* (a full saint), all desire/greed and ignorance are eliminated. The arahant lives his last life, there being no more rebirth for him.

Dying the way she did, it is clear that Kuai Chan had a good death. What better way to go than this – with her mind intent on Nibbana. Who can say what unique experience she might have undergone? Only she can know. But one thing is certain, her mind was even, to the last, inclined to Nibbana. I would like to think that she had attained her Nibbana. If she had not done so in this life, I would think that with her mind, being so firm and resolute, she would have undergone a good rebirth as a human being or *deva* (a celestial being) and would attain her cherished goal in that life.

As a Buddhist, she had instructed Billy to give her a very simple funeral, devoid of superfluous rites and rituals. According to her desire, Billy arranged for her cremation the following day. Several Buddhist monks, yogis and friends recited Buddhist suttas. It was all very simple, as she had requested. Billy collected her ashes and had them strewn at the bodhi tree at their teacher's meditation hermitage in Johor.

Recollecting their life together, Billy said Kuai Chan was the best wife he could ask for: “We were married for 22 years and she stood by me through thick and thin, through my many trials and tribulations. She had a cheerful and bright disposition. She was always loving and caring. Even when she was ill she was marvellous. She never complained. She was not depressed. There was no anger or bitterness in her. She remained calm and steady. She could still smile and laugh. She accepted all her suffering with grace. She would say that it was only her body that was sick but not her mind. Her mind was still fine and healthy. Her concern too was not for herself but for others. She said that if she could live ten years longer, she would do more Dhamma work. She was concerned too about me and the children.

“In fact, she took her suffering better than I did. I could not

bear to see her in so much pain. I tried to get her all the best herbs in the hope of a cure or some respite. Sometimes I asked why all this should happen to her. And I thought: Let her live 10 years more and I 10 years less. Let me give her 10 years of my life. But of course that's not for us to say. It's kamma that has the last say.

“She used to tell me: ‘It’s my kamma, Billy. It’s all right. I do not know what I might have done in my past lives. I must accept my kamma.’ Sometimes she would say: ‘I’m so sorry I give you all this trouble, Billy, all this suffering. You know, Billy, I owe you a lot in this life.’ I would tell her not to say like that. She doesn’t owe me anything, I said. We are husband and wife, are we not? – and she has been a great wife to me. We have gone through thick and thin together, and now in her hour of need, I shall be by her side. We shall sink or swim together, I told her, I assured her.

“At other times she would tell me: ‘Billy, this is the true teaching, the true path, I am very convinced of that,’ and she reminded me not to neglect my practice of meditation, not to be complacent but to practise hard. We had been searching for some time for a teaching that we could relate to. And when we came across Buddhism and Vipassana meditation in 1988, we took to it. You know, we used to discuss the Dhamma together every night over a cup of tea. We had a great relationship.”

Kuai Chan’s cousin, Sati, once asked her whether she had any fear of the cancer, and she said no, she was not afraid of the disease. She was prepared to take on the pain without drugs. She was truly a heroic yogi, one who in the face of great odds, still persevered in her practice of the Dhamma. She made me wonder if I, as a monk, were to be in her condition, to have cancer, would I be able to bear up that much, to have that much courage and endurance? She is truly an inspiring example, a teacher by

example to us all. I must thank Billy for foregoing his privacy to share with us this inspiring account so that we too can be encouraged in our practice and be more determined to strive harder.

Billy asked me to put on record his gratitude to Ven Sujiva and other monks and yogis for all the kind assistance they have given him and Kuai Chan. Fellow yogis from the Buddhist Wisdom Centre, PJ, had especially given much moral support and encouragement to Kuai Chan throughout her sickness. "I do not know how to express my gratitude to all the people who had helped us. Please tell them I wish to thank them all, to say: 'Thank you. Thank you very much for everything you all have done for Kuai Chan.'"

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*That best portion of a good man's life,  
His little nameless, unremembered acts  
of kindness and of love.*

Woodsworth

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*Earlier* I said that when I saw the sick, the dying and the dead, two resolutions arose in my mind. One is to be able to take pain and death with a smile, to be able to remain mindful and composed to the very end. Now I wish to touch on my second resolution. Yes, seeing how we human beings and in fact all living things, are subject to so much suffering, I feel that the least we can do while we are alive is to contribute to the alleviation of the suffering around us.

Many people are serving humanity in wondrous ways. Mother Theresa, for example, has devoted her whole life to the caring of the needy and destitute. Many people and organisations are involved in providing social services to the sick, the handicapped, the starving, the old folks, the dying and others. All great religious teachers exhort their disciples to be charitable. Jesus Christ said: "Love your neighbour as yourself." And he praised those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, gave shelter to the destitute, visited the sick and the imprisoned, saying that "Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brothers, you have done it unto me."

There is a similar saying in the Koran where Prophet Muhammad said God might say to a person on Judgment Day: “I was hungry but you did not feed me. I was sick and you did not visit me.” And when asked by the bewildered person how could that be, God would reply: “Such a one asked for bread and you did not give it to him. Such a one was sick and you did not visit him.”

In Buddhism although we do not believe in a Creator God, we believe in goodness and we are exhorted not to harm or kill even an animal or an insect. We believe in the law of *kamma* – that good begets good and bad begets bad. And so we are enjoined to always adhere to the good: to abstain from killing, stealing, cheating, sexual misconduct, lying and taking alcohol and drugs. We are to train ourselves to reach a stage where we will do good just for the sake of doing good, and not because of the fear of hell or the anticipation of rewards. We will then do good because we delight in doing good and are naturally inclined to good. In other words, we can't help but be good. Goodness and us are one.

The Buddha enjoined on his followers to be charitable and caring. In giving, he said every little effort counts. Even throwing some crumbs into the water to feed fishes is praised by the Buddha. Once, when some monks failed to attend on a sick monk, the Buddha personally bathed the sick monk and admonished the others, saying: “Whoever attends on the sick attends on me.” The Buddha urged kings to rule with compassion. He advised them to weed out poverty which is one of the contributory factors to theft and other crimes. A man of peace, the Buddha once intervened when two countries wanted to go to war over a stretch of river water. The Buddha asked them: Which is more important – the water or the blood of human beings that will flow as a result of a war. The warring parties saw the folly of their quarrel and withdrew without a fight.

One of the most benevolent of kings who came under the influence of the Buddha's teachings was Asoka, who reigned in India during the 3rd century B.C., about 200 years after the death of the Buddha. Renowned for his humanitarianism, Asoka's generosity and kindness extended even to animals. He was reputed to have provided doctors for the treatment of both man and beast. He built public parks, resthouses for travellers and hospices for the poor and sick. Although a staunch Buddhist, Asoka gave his people full freedom of worship and even supported other religious sects. In one of his famous edicts engraved on rocks, he said he "wishes members of all faiths to live everywhere in his kingdom...(He) honours men of all faiths, members of religious orders and laymen alike, with gifts and various marks of esteem." He desired all faiths to be honoured because "by honouring them, one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others...Therefore concord alone is desirable...(and he, Asoka) desires men of all faiths to know each other's doctrines and to acquire sound doctrines..."

Asoka saw his role as a benevolent father and he regarded his people like his children, saying that he desired for them "every kind of prosperity and happiness." The Buddha, could he have witnessed Asoka's reign, would have been filled with joy at seeing his teachings being adhered to so diligently by the great king. H.G. Wells, in his *Outline of History*, said that among all the kings that had come and gone in the world, "the name of Asoka shines, and shines almost alone, a star." Surely, all governments will do well to study and apply Asoka's humane approach in governing.

And if we too are to follow the Buddha's teachings, then we would, like Asoka, work in our own way to alleviate suffering

and spread peace and happiness. The Buddha himself had set us the finest example, having dedicated his whole life to showing people the way out of suffering. Yes, the Buddha was concerned not only with alleviating suffering but also with eradicating it completely. And so after attaining enlightenment he spent the whole of his 45 remaining years teaching people the way to the complete eradication of suffering. He taught the path of mindfulness.

The Buddha saw that only through a radical approach can one eliminate suffering. Although taking care of the sick, healing diseases, providing food and material aid to the needy are part and parcel of the treatment of suffering, the Buddha wanted to attend to more than just the symptoms: he sought for a *total cure* from the disease of suffering. So he meditated on the whole question of life and death. And he saw that to solve the problem at the very root level, we need to do a complete overhaul of the mind. Suffering is essentially mental. When there is physical pain, a person normally reacts to it with grief, fear and depression. But a meditator, the Buddha said, can tolerate the physical pain in such a way that there is no mental suffering. In other words he does not react to the pain with grief, worry, depression, aversion, anger and so on. Instead, he can respond with calmness and equanimity. He can be cheerful, and even comfort and encourage others!

So the Buddha saw the problem as essentially mental. If we can rid our mind of greed, anger and ignorance (of the nature of life), the Buddha said we can totally overcome and eradicate mental suffering, such as worry and anxiety, sorrow and lamentation. As for physical suffering, we have to concede that it is unavoidable as long as we have this body. All of us know as a fact that nobody can escape from old age, disease and death. But

the Buddha said once the mind is purified of all defilements of greed, anger and so on, then physical suffering does not frighten us anymore. One becomes unshakable. Nothing can upset one anymore, not even the most excruciating pain that diseases such as cancer can bring. One's mind can remain cool throughout. Thus, when the Buddha's disciple Anuruddha, was once asked how he could remain cool when he was grievously ill, he replied that it was because he had well mastered his mind through his practice of mindfulness as taught by the Buddha.

Finally too, the Buddha taught that for such an accomplished person who had eliminated greed, anger and ignorance, there is no more rebirth. When he dies that is his last life. He has attained the state of Nibbana – perfect peace. Not undergoing rebirth he can never undergo old age, disease and death. Just that, the Buddha said, is the end of suffering.

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## *Alleviating suffering*

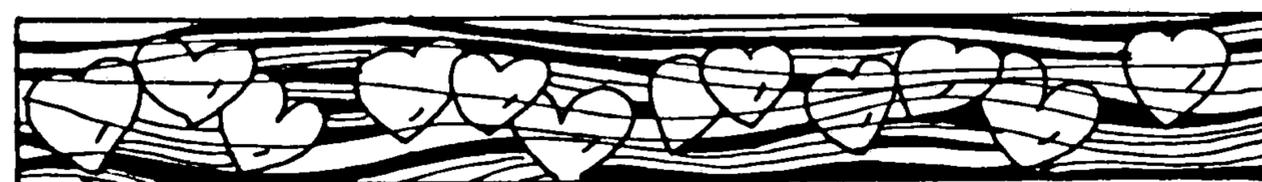
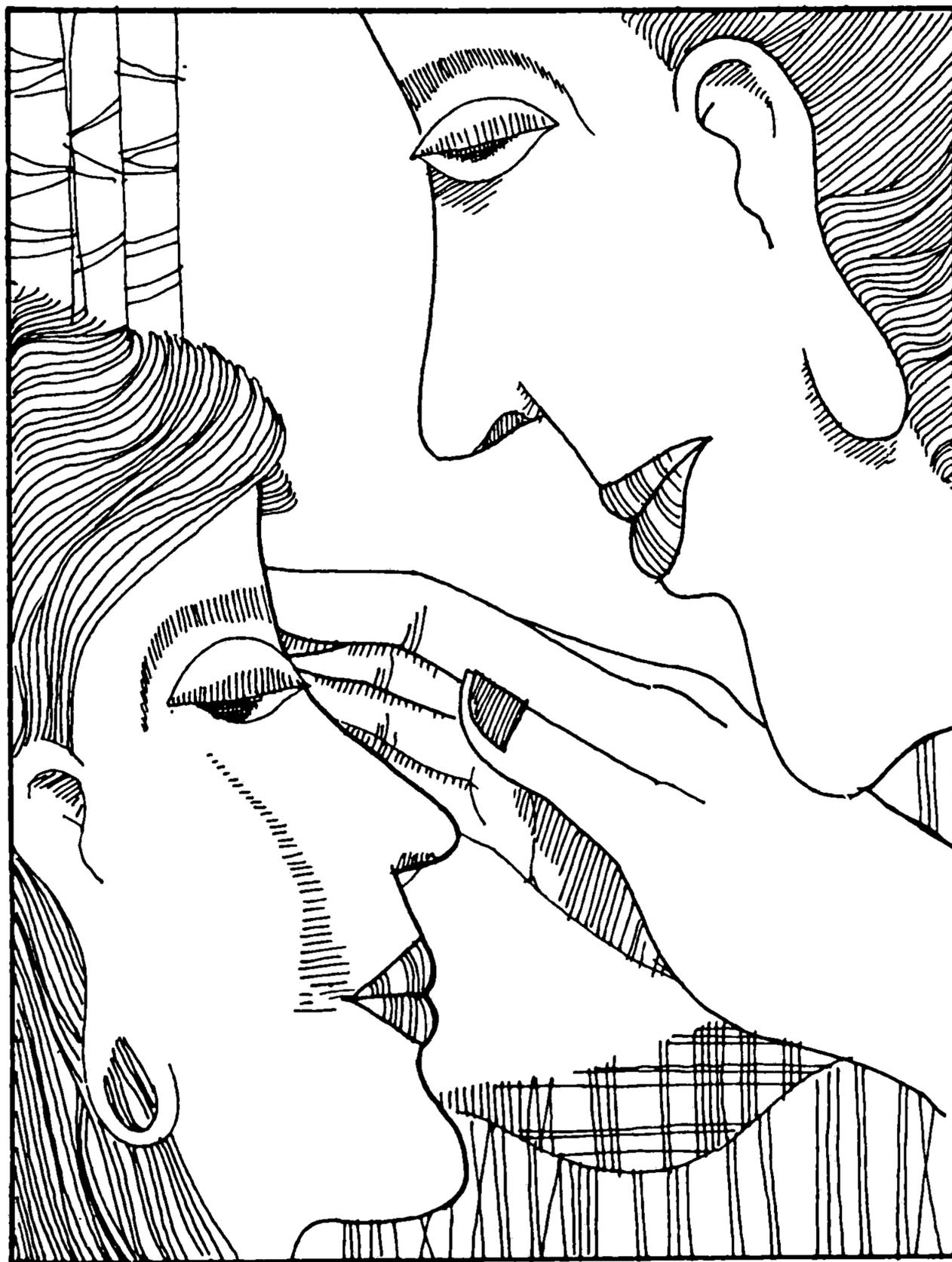
While we are striving to make a complete end of suffering, we should, along the way, help to alleviate suffering in whatever way we can. Yes, it is obvious that there is no shortage of suffering in the world. Many people are suffering in various ways. If we read the newspapers we can find suffering all over the place. People quarrel, fight, kill, rob, lie, cheat, and inflict pain in various ways on each other. Out of ignorance we hurt each other. Furthermore, calamities, accidents, mishaps, starvation, disease abound. And always disease, old age, and death are dogging our every step.

Yes, the world is laden with suffering. Why should we add to it? Shouldn't we instead try to alleviate the suffering? Even if we

cannot do much we can do a little. Every little effort counts. As somebody puts it: *Nobody made a greater mistake than to do nothing because he could do only a little.* Each one of us can do something, according to our inclination and ability. For a start we could start being nicer. For instance, we can check our anger. Everytime we are angry we cause pain to ourselves and others. But if we can just check our anger and cultivate tolerance and patience, love and compassion we can be nicer people, and that can go quite a long way to help spread good cheer and happiness.

In other words, we must start by cleaning up our own minds of unwholesome and negative contents of greed, hatred and delusion. Corresponding to our ability to check these unwholesome states, love and compassion will develop in us. We can be kinder in our relationship with the people close to us and around us. We can try to speak more lovingly and gently, and avoid all harsh and rough speech. We can become more considerate and caring. If we are only concerned with our own well-being, then we will not be able to love very well. To love well we have to consider not so much our own well-being but that of others. So we have to ask ourselves. Do we love enough? Do we care enough? If we do not, then we cannot act to alleviate suffering. For it is out of real love and compassion that we can act.

A Meditation Master once said if you want to know whether you have loved well, you should approach your loved one one day and gently take her hand in yours. Look deeply into her eyes and ask her: "My dear, have I been loving you properly? Do I love you enough? Am I making you happy? If I am not, can you please tell me what is lacking so that I can change and love you better?" If you ask her gently with true love and care, then she might cry. And that, the Master said, is a good sign. For it meant you have



*My dear, have I been loving you properly?*

touched a chord in her heart. And there can be communication between you.

And so she might tell you between sobs how thoughtless you had been at times. For example, she might say: "You don't open the car door for me anymore. You used to do that when you first courted me and even during the first year of our marriage. You would see to it that I was properly seated and then you would very gently close the door for me. Nowadays you don't do that anymore. You just get into the car first and start the engine. I have to open the door myself and get in quickly. Otherwise you would start moving off even before I had closed the door! I felt like crying when you behaved this way. What had happened to the gentle and thoughtful person that I married?"

And she might continue: "You don't hold my hand anymore when we cross the road. You just walk ahead and expect me to follow you. So too when you walk into the restaurant. You don't open the door and invite me to go in first. You don't pull out the chair for me to sit on. You don't ask me what I'd like to eat but you just order what you like to eat. You don't buy me any more pretty dresses. You don't buy any presents for my parents, not even on festive occasions. And although you may remember to give me presents on my birthday, you don't include one of those lovely birthday cards with beautiful and heartfelt messages. In short, you don't do all the nice little things you used to do when you first courted and married me. If I knew you were going to change like this, I would have second thoughts about marrying you. I have been wondering whether you really love or care for me anymore!" And she may go on in this vein, citing a list of her unhappiness. She might even sob louder and you may be taken aback, for you hadn't known she was taking all these things to heart, that she was missing all the nice little things you used to

do for her, that she missed your little but important demonstrations of care and affection.

Of course, it is also possible that you too might have some legitimate grievances. So this might be a good time to have it out, but in a very gentle way. You might say: “Oh, I am so sorry for the heartless and thoughtless way that I have behaved, my dearest. Believe me, I truly am. Please forgive me. I will make it up to you from now on. I promise I will not be so careless in future. I will take good care of you. I will resume to do all the little things which I have neglected to do for you. I didn’t realise you miss them so much.

“But dear, please do not get angry at what I’m about to say. As much as I am at fault, you should also know that there were some things you used to do for me that you never do now. For example, you know that I love the kangkung fried in sambal belacan that you used to cook for me. But nowadays you never cook that anymore, not to mention the spicy tomyam soup and several other dishes. You know, the old saying about the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach is still quite pertinent.

“In the old days you used to wake me up with a smile and a gentle peck on the cheek but you never do that anymore. Sometimes you wake up rather late and I have to prepare my own breakfast or eat at the office. You used to be waiting at the door for me when I returned from work and asked me how my day was. You were really interested to know then and you were very sympathetic and comforting whenever I had a bad day. But nowadays, you don’t seem to care about how I am faring anymore, whether I have been having a good day or a hard time. You would be watching the TV, yelling at the kids, or be at the beauty parlour or doing something or other. When I called out: “Hello dear, I’m back,” you sometimes snapped at me and said

things which are not very endearing.” And so on and so forth.

And so both of you can have a heart-to-heart exchange. Communication is very important in a relationship. Is it not? Relationships break down when there is no communication, and both parties keep their grievances to themselves, privately nursing them in their heart. But when there is communication there can be understanding. A pouring out of the heart between two parties can lead to understanding and love. If two persons care enough and value their relationship, then they can communicate and take corrective measures whenever necessary. In that way, the relationship can become more strong and beautiful with each passing day.



*Each* one of us needs to contribute in our own way, in whatever way we know how. In my case, for example, I, as a monk, can contribute by sharing what little Dhamma knowledge I know, what little understanding I may have. I can encourage people to practise meditation and guide them a little along the way. I can urge people to be loving and caring, considerate and patient, and so on. Of course we are not perfect and there are times when we ourselves fail to deliver. The saying that it is easy to preach but most difficult to practise what one preaches is very true. So I should be the first to acknowledge my own shortcomings and to accept corrections. I ask though that people, in judging me or others, would consider mitigating factors such as good intention. We mean well and we do not mean to hurt. But because of our own defects, unskilfulness, impatience, intolerance, conceit, etc, we may hurt others even as we mean well. But if a person is magnanimous, he or she can understand and be forgiving. The

ability to forgive is a very wonderful quality, which is why the saying *To err is human; to forgive divine* has been coined.

Avail yourself to giving and you yourself will know best how you can contribute. All of us have different skills, talents and aptitudes. Our conditions and circumstances may differ. So each of us can only contribute in our own way, according to our conditions and inclinations. The important thing is that we try; we do something according to our ability. As we have said, every little bit counts and as time goes on, we may find that actually we have done quite a fair bit. And that is cause for us to rejoice. Of course it doesn't mean that we should rest on our laurels. There is still more work to be done. So we keep trying; we keep forging ahead.

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*He dwells having suffused the first quarter with a mind of loving-kindness, likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth; just so above, below, around he dwells having suffused the whole world everywhere, in every way, with a mind of loving-kindness that is far-reaching, widespread, immeasurable, without enmity, without illwill.*

Buddha

*To understand everything is to forgive everything.  
And then too there can be love.*

Anonymous

# LOVE IS UNDERSTANDING

.....

**To** die well we must live well. If we have lived well we can die well. There will be no regrets. We can go peacefully, content that we have done what we could, that along the way we have spread understanding and happiness, that we have lived according to our principles and commitment to the ideals of love and compassion.

Love *is* understanding. Love does not judge or condemn. Love listens and understands. Love cares and sympathises. Love accepts and forgives. Love knows no barriers. It does not segregate and say: I am a Theravadin and you are a Mahayanese or Tibetan. It does not say: I am a Buddhist and you are a Christian, a Muslim, a Hindu. Or I am a Chinese; you're a Malay, an Indian, a Eurasian. Or I'm an Easterner and you are a Westerner; or I'm Malaysian, you're Japanese, an American, a Burmese, a Thai and so on.

Love transcends all barriers. Love sees and feels that we are all of one race, the human race. Our tears are all the same; they are salty, and our blood is all red. When there is this kind of love and compassion, we can empathise with another human being. We can see that we are all travelling in the same boat upon the stormy sea of life. We are fellow-sufferers in *samsara*, the endless faring-on in the round of birth and death. We are brothers and

sisters.

When we can see and feel this, then all barriers of race, religion, ideology and so on will fall away. We can reach out with a heart of pure love. We can understand and feel another's suffering. Compassion will swell and fill our breast. And in whatever we say or do, this love and compassion will come across. It will soothe and heal. It will contribute to peace and understanding.

### *The man and the scorpion*

Love goes hand-in-hand with compassion. When we have a loving heart, compassion arises easily in us. Whenever we see somebody suffering, we feel an urge to reach out to ease that person's suffering. Compassion has this quality of desiring to eliminate suffering. It can be especially felt when we act spontaneously to remove or ease another's suffering. A story here will help to clarify the point: A man saw a scorpion drowning in a puddle of water. A spontaneous desire to save arose in his heart, and without hesitating he stretched out his hand, lifted out the scorpion from the puddle, and put it on dry ground. The scorpion stung him. And wanting to cross the road, the scorpion resumed its walk and headed straight again into the the puddle! Seeing it floundering and drowning again, the man picked it up a second time and was again stung. Someone who came along and saw all that had happened, said to the man: "Why are you so stupid? Now you see you have been stung not once but twice! It's a silly thing to do to try to save a scorpion." The man replied: "Sir, I can't help it. You see, it is the nature of the scorpion to sting. But it is my nature to save. I can't help but try to save that scorpion."

True, the man could have exercised some wisdom and used a

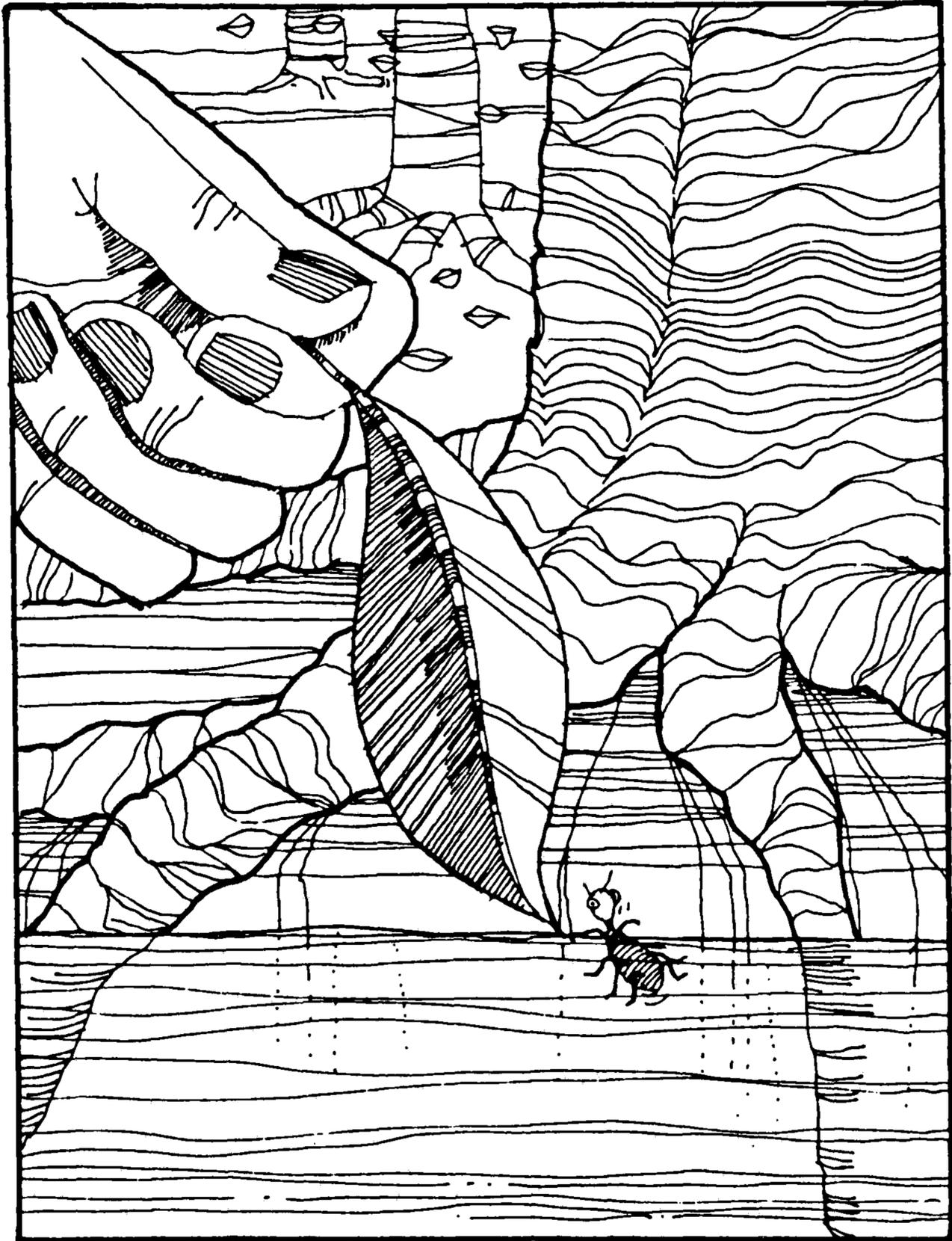
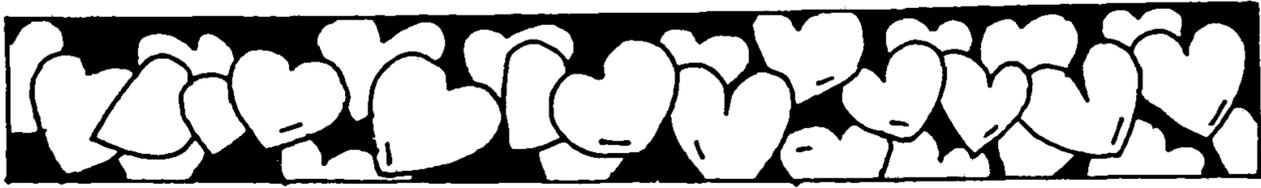
stick or something to lift out the scorpion. But then he might have thought that he could have lifted the scorpion with his hand in such a way as not to be stung. Or he might have thought that a scorpion in such a dire strait would not sting him. Whatever it may be, the moral of the story is in the spontaneous response of the man in wanting to save another living being, even though it may be an insect. It also shows that the compassionate man is such that even though he may receive ingratitude from a person he had helped, it does not matter. It is just his nature to help, and if he could help again, he would. He doesn't know how to harbour any bitterness or grudges!

Compassion then is the language of the heart. At the time when we are motivated by love and compassion, we reach out to help without discrimination as to the race, creed or nationality of another. In the light of compassion, identification to race, creed, etc becomes secondary; they become insignificant. Further, such compassion is not confined to human beings but is also extended to all living things including animals and insects. In line with the above theme of compassion as the language of the heart, I will like to offer you a poem:

### *THE LANGUAGE OF COMPASSION*

*Mahayana Theravada Vajrayana  
Christian Buddhist Muslim Hindu  
Malay Chinese Indian Eurasian  
Malaysian Japanese American African  
White man Black man Yellow man Brown man  
and so on and so forth  
as you like.*

*What does it matter?*



*The language of compassion is the language of the heart.*

*The language of compassion  
is the language of the heart!*

*When the heart speaks  
A thousand flowers bloom  
And love flows  
like the morning sun  
streaming through the window.*

*No words are needed  
a look, a touch,  
will suffice  
to say  
what a thousand words could not.*

*And Compassion glows  
like the radiant star  
in the night sky.*

*Barriers crumble  
prejudices flounder  
Supremacy regained  
Love & Compassion  
vanquishing all fears & misgivings  
healing wounds  
reign.*

I feel that if we have tried to cultivate this kind of love and compassion, then when the time comes for us to die, we will go peacefully. Even if we have not succeeded 100 per cent in loving perfectly, we can still be happy and content that we have tried. And surely we would have succeeded to a certain extent.

## *The Five Precepts*

If we have been trying to cultivate this kind of love, then keeping the five basic precepts will not be that difficult. The first precept, as we know, is not to kill, not to take any life, even that of an animal or insect. This is a beautiful precept. It means that we respect life. Nay, not only do we respect life, we also cherish it. Life is precious to all. When we give life, we are giving a most precious gift. When we keep this precept we become kinder. Not only do we refrain from killing, we also refrain from harming any living being.

True, in this imperfect world where the strong prey on the weak, killing is rampant. We can see this in the animal world, how a tiger would feed on a deer, a snake on a frog, a frog on a fly, a bird on a worm, and a big fish on a small fish. And we humans too kill the animals and fish and even each other. But we are not here to judge or condemn. We understand our human imperfections and the imperfect nature of existence. The Buddha understood too. He says that when we can purify our mind and attain Nibbana, then we can opt out of this imperfect existence, this cycle of birth and death. It is for us to verify whether this can be done. When we have cleansed our minds of all greed, hatred and ignorance, we will know with the certainty of direct experience whether the Buddha spoke true or not. Until then, I have faith that I can do no better than to follow the path of the Buddha, the path of purifying the mind.

Each of us has to follow our path of development. Let each one of us try to keep the first precept to the best of our ability: We should not kill; we should spare life, give life.

The second precept is not to steal or cheat, not to take anything with dishonest intent. We are honest and we shall earn

our living the honest way. There are some people who say that an honest man cannot succeed or become rich. I do not agree with this. I'm sure there are many honest men who stuck to their principles and succeed. And furthermore they enjoy the happiness of a clear conscience and peaceful mind. On the other hand those who cheated are often exposed and punished in the end. Even if they do manage to escape detection, they still suffer from fear of detection and the pangs of a guilty conscience; and when they die, the suffering of a woeful rebirth awaits them. As such, honesty has always been and will always be the best policy. Do not listen to those who say otherwise. The honest can be more successful. Even if we should face greater obstacles, we would not cheat to succeed. We would rather be honest and poor, than to be rich but crooked. There is nothing so blissful as a clear conscience, especially at the time when we face death.

The third precept is to be responsible in sexual matters. If two partners take their relationship seriously, are considerate, loving and faithful to each other, then their love is sealed. No third party can come in between them. Sexual responsibility is very important. Because of irresponsibility, victimisation occurs. Pimps destroy the lives of young girls; and men who succumb to their lust are abettors to the ill-deed. But we are not here to judge but to plead for true love and compassion. Truly, if we can purify our mind and check our lust, there will be less suffering and exploitation in this world. And the dreaded AIDS disease which has become a world-wide scourge can also be contained.

The fourth precept is not to lie but to speak the truth. Again do not listen to those who say that one cannot succeed without lying or making false representations. Truth is one of the ten *paramis* (perfections) held fast to by a bodhisatta (a person aspiring for Buddhahood). All Buddhists have to develop their

paramis to a considerable extent too if they want to attain arahathood – liberation from the round of birth and death. The Buddha wanted us to be so perfectly truthful that he exhorted us not to lie even in jest. So we should try our best to uphold this noble precept of non-lying. Furthermore, though we may not seek it, the reputation of an honest man will nevertheless spread far and wide. Even his detractors will have to concede and give him due respect.

The fifth precept is not to take alcohol and drugs because they befuddle the mind. And they are also bad for the body. Some people think that this precept may allow a little social drinking but I do not think so. The Buddha would not want us to compromise our mindfulness which could in turn cause us to compromise our other precepts. Besides, alcohol is harmful to our health. As for drugs we are all agreed that hard drugs such as heroin are out. But cigarette smoking may be thought by some people to be not included in this precept. (During the Buddha's time, tobacco had apparently not been discovered.) However, in the light of present day overwhelming medical evidence on the harmfulness of tobacco and the efforts of governments all over the world to ban or curtail its usage, we can confidently say that if the Buddha were here today, he too would strongly discourage us from smoking; for he would not want us to compromise our physical health nor would he want us to be addicted to a mild but proven hazardous drug.

More could be said on the great damage alcohol and tobacco had wreaked and are still wreaking on society, but it is not within the scope of this work to go into a long discussion of the subject. Suffice to say that it is our view that even a little so-called social drinking and smoking too would infringe somewhat on the spirit of the fifth precept. It is better to abstain completely, especially in

the case of alcohol, having given due consideration to these very words of the Buddha: “Monks, taking of intoxicants when practised, developed, and repeatedly performed, causes one to arise in hell, in the world of animals, and in the world of hungry ghosts; the very least result is that even should one be reborn as a human being one will be inflicted with insanity.”

When we keep these five precepts, we give happiness and security to others. How? Why, nobody need to worry about us. They need not fear us. They can feel very secure and comfortable with us. For they can be assured that we will not harm them, steal from them or cheat them. We will not have any affair with their spouses. We will not lie to them. And what more, if we do not drink or smoke, they do not have to worry about their children aping our drinking or smoking habit, or the hazard they face by breathing in our side-stream smoke. They will feel they can trust us, for we don't even drink. We are religious and keeping to the straight and narrow path. We are harmless. Those who strongly crave for sensual pleasures may think that we are living a very dull life and that we are foolish. But it doesn't matter. We are happy for what we are. We are happy as we are. And truth to say, we will be praised by the wise.

So it is good when we can keep the basic five precepts. Furthermore we practise generosity and kindness. We care and we share whatever we can afford. We also cultivate mindfulness as advised by the Buddha. We try to live a mindful life. We meditate to gain more understanding of the nature of our existence, its characteristics of impermanence, suffering and no-self. Thus when we have done all these, when we have lived a good life, what do we have to fear when we die? What regrets can we have?

That is why we say that to die well we must live well. And

that when we have lived well, we can die well. We can go peacefully, content that we have done all that we could. True, we may make some mistakes along the way. But then who hasn't? Jesus Christ once said: "Let him who has not sinned cast the first stone." So before we had learnt and mellowed, we may have done some bad deeds. That is understandable, because we are all not perfect. But the thing is that once we realise our mistakes, we begin to cultivate love and compassion, we begin to keep the precepts and purify our mind. We can be happy because we had time to change to the right track. As they say it is better late than never. We may arrive a little late after the others, but at least we still arrive.

o o o o o

WE  
ARE  
OUR  
OWN  
SAVIOURS

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*Sometimes* as a monk I'm asked to go for funeral chanting. I do feel sorry for the bereaved ones but sometimes I also feel quite helpless because there is so much confusion as regards the role of a monk in funeral chanting.

The other day a young lady approached me. Her father had died that morning. He was only 42. She pleaded with me in Hokkien: "Tolong lai liam keng, khuih lor hor wah-eh-pah." It means: "Please come and chant prayers. Please open the way for my father." I look at her with as much compassion as I can muster. I can feel her confusion and suffering. She must be about 20 I thought, and she is a filial daughter. In my heart I told myself: "O dear, how on earth am I going to open the way for anybody. What imaginary path am I going to draw in the air for his equally imaginary spirit to tread upon? How can I tell this poor young lady in her present state of grief and confusion that there is no such way as she may have conceived it to be."

The Buddha was put in such a position once and how did he respond to it? Well, one day a young man approached and asked

the Buddha: "O lord, my father has died. Please come and say some prayers for him. Raise up his soul so that he can go to heaven. The Brahmins perform such rites but you Buddha are so much more powerful than them. If you were to do it, my father's soul is sure to fly straight to heaven."

The Buddha replied: "Very well. Please go to the market and fetch me two earthen pots and some butter." The young man was happy that the Buddha had condescended to perform some powerful magic to save his father's soul. He hurried to town and got what was required. Then the Buddha instructed him: "Put the butter in one pot and stones in the other pot. Then throw both pots into the pond." The man did so, and both pots sank to the bottom of the pond. Then the Buddha continued: "Now take a staff and strike the pots at the bottom of the pond." The man did so. The pots broke and the butter, being light, floated up while the stones, being heavy, remained where they were at the bottom.

Then the Buddha said: "Now quick, go and summon all the priests. Tell them to come and chant so that the butter can go down and the stones can come up." The young man looked at the Buddha, flabbergasted. "Lord," he said, "You can't be serious. Surely you can't expect the butter being light to sink and the stones being heavy to rise up. That would be against the law of nature."

The Buddha smiled and said: "Even so, my son, don't you see that if your father had led a good life, then his deeds would be as light as the butter, so that no matter what he will rise up to heaven. Nobody can prevent that, not even me. For nobody can go against the natural law of kamma. But if your father had led a bad life, then just like the stones that are heavy, he would sink to hell. No amount of prayers by all the powerful priests in the world can cause it to happen otherwise."

The young man understood. He corrected his wrong concept and stopped going around asking for the impossible. The Buddha's simile had driven home the point: Nobody can save us, least of all after we are dead. According to the law of kamma, we are owners of our deeds, heirs of our deeds. Our deeds are our true property. They are our true refuge, our true relatives. They are the womb from which we spring. When we die we cannot take even one cent with us or any of our personal belongings. Neither can even one of our loved ones accompany us. Just as we came alone according to our kamma, we must go alone. If we have understood the law of kamma well, then we will appreciate how important it is to lead a good life while we are alive. For to wait until we are dead will be too late. There is little that can be done then.



### *Rebirth is instantaneous*

Nevertheless, there is a role which a monk can play in funeral chanting. And that is the Buddhist way of sharing merits. How is the sharing or transference of merits effected? Before we can explain this we must first understand what happens at death. According to the Buddha, rebirth takes place *instantaneously* after death, consciousness having the nature of arising and passing away unceasingly. There is no interval between death and the next birth.\* One moment we are dead and the next moment rebirth takes place, either in the human plane, the

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\* The Tibetan belief that there is an intermediate stage or an interval of up to 49 days between death and rebirth runs contrary to Theravada Buddhism, which states that rebirth takes place immediately after death. For more details on rebirth in the Theravadin Buddhist perspective, see Narada's *The Buddha and His Teachings*, chapter 28.

animal plane, the suffering spirit or ghost (*peta*) plane, the demon (*asura*) plane, the hell plane, or the celestial (*deva*) plane.

One takes rebirth according to one's kamma. If one has led a good life one will generally get a good rebirth. The mind is likely to be in a wholesome state at the death moment enabling a good rebirth to come about. One may be reborn as a human being or as a god in one of the many heavenly realms. The Buddha was able to see with his psychic powers the various realms of existence, and also how beings died and were reborn immediately according to their deeds. The Buddha and many of the monks during his time too were able to recollect their innumerable past lives.

If one has led a generally evil life, then a bad rebirth is more than likely to come about – in one of the four woeful states as a hell-being, a hungry ghost (*peta*), an animal or a demon (*asura*). But wherever one may be reborn, one will not be there forever. On the expiry of one's lifespan, one dies and undergoes new rebirth. So existence as a hell-being or a ghost too is not forever. There is hope: one has a chance to come up again, though it might take an incalculably long time to do so. So it is better not to drop into the woeful states at all, for once there you'll never know how long you'll have to stay there. It might seem like an eternity!

Similarly, existence in the heavenly realms is not permanent. On expiry of one's lifespan there, one is liable to drop down to a lower plane. Only an *arahant* who has given up all desire for rebirth, having eradicated the mental defilements of greed, hatred and delusion, will undergo no new rebirth. On dying he arises no more in any of the 31 planes of existence. He is subject no more to *samsara*, the round of birth and death. He attains *parinibbana* which is the extinction (*nirodha*) of mind and body, the extinguishing of the whole mass of suffering. But until one becomes an arahant one will still be subject to rebirth.

## *How sharing of merits is effected*

Now, for transference of merits to be effected, it is essential for the being who is to receive the merits to know what is going on. He must be present and be able to approve of the good deeds done in his name or on his behalf. If he approves, then that approving or rejoicing state of mind is a wholesome state of mind. In other words *he made his own merits by rejoicing over the good deed which had been done on account of him*. Thus it is not that we transfer our merits to him. That is not literally possible. What happens is that he rejoices and that rejoicing is a meritorious deed by which his suffering may be alleviated and his happiness increased.

If after death, rebirth takes place in the human or animal plane, the being will be in no position to know what is going on, – for instance he may still be a foetus in the womb of his mother. Under such circumstances, he would not be able to rejoice and partake in the merit-making.

If a person has been reborn as a hell-being, he too cannot know what is going on in this world because he would be suffering in hell, which is another plane of existence in which he would have no knowledge of what is transpiring here on earth. If he is reborn as a *deva* (heavenly being), it is unlikely that he would keep in touch with this world. It is said that he would be too happy and busy exploring the wonders of his new existence to be immediately concerned about what is happening on earth. Time is relative and a day, say in the Tavatimsa heaven, is said to be the equivalent of 100 years on earth! So by the time a deva should, so to speak, take a look down here, we'll all be dead and gone! Moreover, we cannot say for certain that a deva will automatically have the psychic powers to recollect his previous life, though the scriptures do record instances of devas

remembering what they had done in their previous life to earn them a celestial rebirth.

So in the Tirokutta sutta, the Buddha told a brahmin that only a *peta* (an unfortunate spirit) would be able to partake in the sharing of merits. These spirits, though in their own realm, are able to perceive with their own eyes the human plane. If they are aware of the meritorious deeds done on account of them, and rejoice thereupon, then they would gain merits as a result of their rejoicing. Of course no-one would like their loved one to be reborn as a *peta*. One would like to think that he (or she) has undergone rebirth as a human being or a *deva*.

So the brahmin asked the Buddha what would happen if the deceased had already obtained a good rebirth. The Buddha replied that it was still good to share merits, for in our beginningless wandering in *samsara*, it was certain that some of our relatives in previous lives have had unfortunate rebirths as *petas*. And as the lifespan of a *peta* can be very very long, they are liable to be still around. So we share the merits with departed relatives and also with all sentient beings. Besides, the Buddha pointed out, the person who did the good deed on account of the departed will himself get the merits too.

Sharing of merits is a Buddhist tradition. The Buddhist does good deeds such as offering almsfood and requisites to monks, sponsoring the printing of Dhamma books and donating to charitable causes, such as homes for the aged, charity hospitals and institutions for the handicapped. Then he invites the departed and all sentient beings to rejoice and share in the merits. This itself is a good deed, the doer of which does not “lose” any merits but gains even more by sharing, as the act of sharing is another meritorious deed. So the living make double merits – first by doing a good deed and second by sharing the

merits.

The presence of monks to recite Buddhist suttas and to give Dhamma talks to the bereaved relatives at the time of their grief is also a great moral support. The monks can remind the living relatives of the Buddha's teaching of impermanence, suffering and no-self. They can urge the relatives to accept the suffering with wisdom, and to strive more diligently to attain Nibbana, the cessation of all suffering.

If we understand and accept the Buddhist concept of rebirth as being instantaneous, then we will understand that what is important is that we must do good deeds while we are alive. By doing good deeds, we gain good kamma. Kamma is our true inheritance, for only those good deeds or kamma can follow us. After death, the burning of paper money, houses, cars, etc. cannot benefit the deceased. It would be against the logic of kamma. Moreover, we can think for ourselves – how can something that is burnt here materialise in another world or anywhere for that matter. What is burnt is just burnt; it stays burnt. In the context of the law of kamma too, offering of food to the deceased is also pointless. On being reborn, the new being will survive on the kind of food that is appropriate for its plane of existence. Thus we find that the Buddha did not at all ask us to offer food to the deceased or burn paper money, etc.

Apparently, these funeral rites and rituals have been handed down from generation to generation without any thought as to their basis and significance. What the Buddha taught is, as explained earlier, to do some good deeds on account or in memory of the deceased and then share the merits, by reciting the Pali or stating in the language we can understand: *May these merits go to the departed. May the departed rejoice and share in the merits done.*

## *A Buddhist funeral is a simple funeral*

The Buddhist way is meaningful and simple. If we can understand and appreciate the Buddhist way, then a Buddhist funeral can be a very simple one devoid of superstitious rites and rituals, devoid of fear, anxiety or confusion. One need not burn this or that, perform all kinds of strange rites and observe all kinds of taboos, all of which are quite meaningless and confusing to the living who usually go along with it more out of fear, social pressure or ignorance than anything else. One need not invite professionals to chant and perform rituals for a hefty fee amounting to thousands of dollars! or engage a band to strike up music, even though it may well be solemn music.

As a Buddhist, one need only to invite Buddhist monks to recite Buddhist suttas which need not be lengthy. It would be good if the suttas can be translated into English or Chinese so that all present can understand, appreciate and reflect on what had been recited, on what the Buddha had taught us about the nature of life and death. Of special importance is the upholding of the five precepts by the lay-people – done by reciting the Pali, preferably with translation, after the monk. The taking and observance of five precepts is basic practice for lay Buddhists. After the taking of precepts, the monk can give a dhamma talk aimed at providing consolation, comfort and strength to the bereaved.

In the Theravadin tradition, monks do not levy any fee at all for their service. The service is done by them out of compassion, to give moral support to the lay-devotees in their hour of need. Thus, the monks would not seek monetary compensation as that would be at odds with the spirit of the Dhamma. Nevertheless, lay-devotees sometimes offer a red packet as a donation to the monks for the purchase of allowable requisites, such as robes or

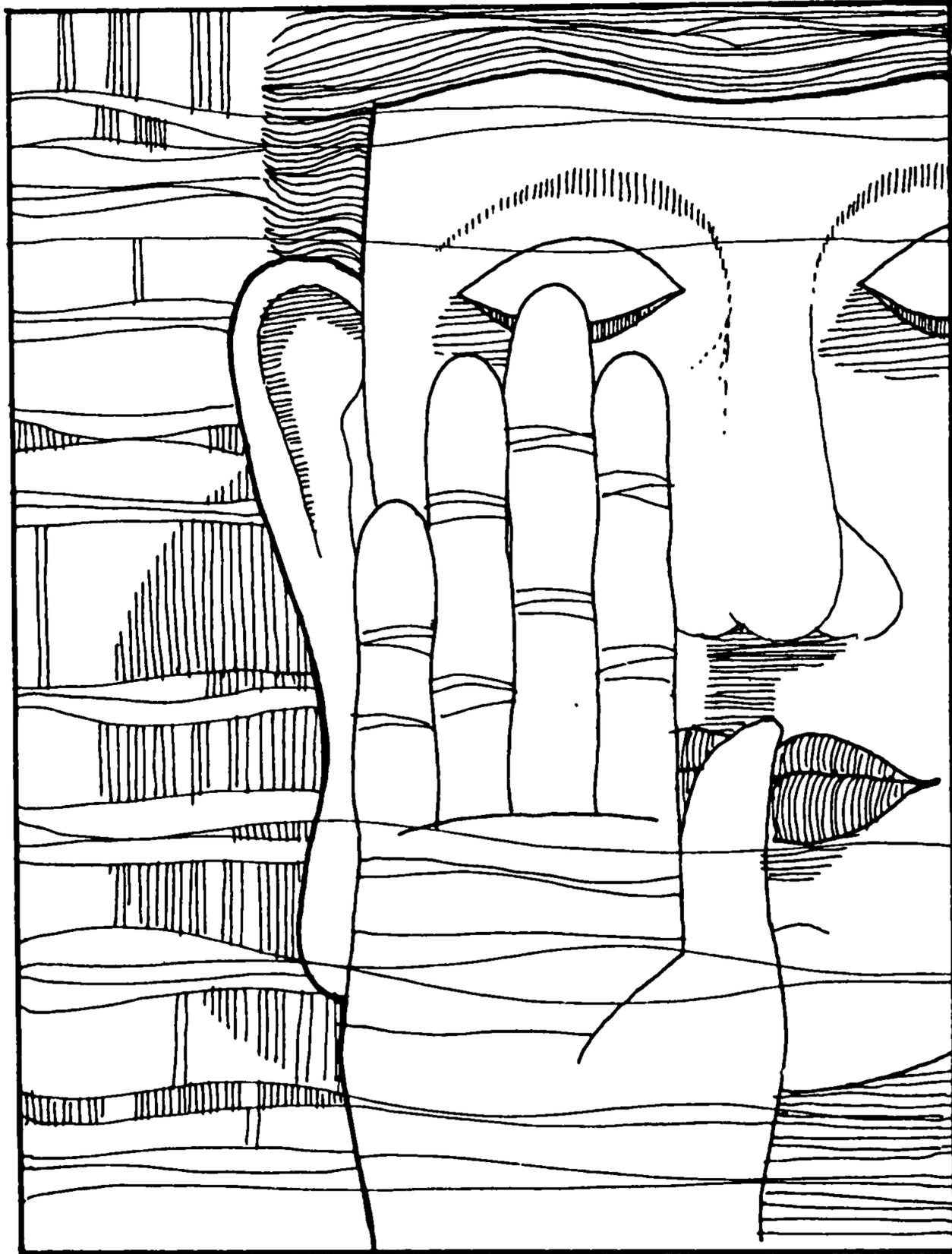
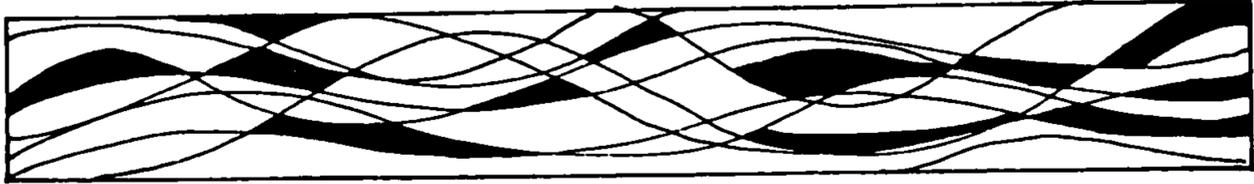
medicines. This sum, if offered, need only be a token. In fact, the monks are not to expect a red packet, and if it should be offered, then it is something which is offered solely on the initiative of the offerer. This packet being a token sum is not a fee but a donation. A fee, in the case of a funeral, is usually a substantial (or exorbitant) sum that would be fixed by the undertaker before he would agree to conduct elaborate services. And that, as we have said, is not the practice for a monk.

The relatives, of course, can offer food (*dana*) to the monks at the temple. Those who are more affluent can make donations for the printing of Dhamma books for free distribution. They can also make donations to charitable institutions, to the poor and needy, and other worthy causes. In lieu of wreaths, relatives and friends can be encouraged to donate towards specified charities. All the merits thus gained can then be shared with the deceased. All these will make the funeral meaningful – *minus* the unskillful practices which involve much confusion and waste of funds.

### *We can learn from others*

The deceased can be cremated or buried promptly – on the same day or the following day. In this regard I think Chinese families can learn something from a Muslim funeral, which I'm told, is simple, practical and inexpensive. A Muslim friend of mine says that the Muslim way is to bury the deceased on the very day of death or, at the latest, the following day. So if a Muslim dies at 2pm, he can be buried before sunset on the same day. If he dies in the late evening or at night, he is buried the following day.

The funeral is an inexpensive, easily affordable one because, as my friend says, Islam discourages extravagance and encourages simplicity and frugality. A Muslim funeral, inclusive



*"Do not believe just anything.  
But think and verify for yourself."*

of the casket, he tells me, can cost as little as \$500 – a far cry from a Chinese funeral which can cost up to \$30,000 or even more! The funeral procedures for the Muslim too are, in the Muslim context, relatively simple and meaningful. A Christian funeral too is simple, inexpensive and meaningful for the Christian, and burial is carried out within 48 hours.

I believe that in life we can never stop learning. There are always better and more meaningful ways of doing things. If we keep an open and unbiased mind we can learn from others. The Buddha advised us in the Kalama sutta that we should always think and investigate for ourselves. If we find that a practice is good and meaningful then we should follow it; if we find that it is bad or unskillful, then we should not follow it, or if we had already been following it, we should be bold and wise enough to discard it. Nothing, the Buddha said, should be followed blindly without understanding or question. The Buddha encouraged us to question and investigate. Even his words are to be investigated and only when found true to be followed. The Buddha does not want us to have blind faith but faith that is based on direct experiential knowledge.

Therefore, if we find simple and good practices in other religions and traditions, we can adapt and follow them as long as they are not in conflict with our religious beliefs. In this regard, we can learn from others in the way they hold a prompt and inexpensive funeral. We should also discard the superstitious and un-Buddhistic practices of ours. As for superstitions, I understand there are many in a traditional Chinese funeral, and I have seen some of these practices for myself while chanting at funerals. I feel quite helpless as I can only witness these practices in silence. There is little one can do. Traditions are most difficult to change; and any effort to make changes will usually meet with

strong resistance and even condemnation.

There were times when I hesitated to go for funeral chanting because I wondered what purpose would my presence there serve. But more often than not, I responded and tried to do what I could by giving a Dhamma talk and clarifying as skillfully as possible the Buddhist position. I think it is high time that Chinese Buddhists re-examine the traditional Chinese funeral practices and make simplifications in line with Buddhist wisdom. I may be criticised for my views but I feel that if we do not speak up, we will be doing a disservice to the Buddhist community.

If I may suggest a simple Buddhist funeral, I will propose that cremation be done on the same day if possible, and if not, the following day. However, some people may wish to keep the body for a few days to enable faraway relatives and friends to come and pay their last respects, or for various other personal reasons. So the decision would be a personal one to be made by the family concerned. I have proposed cremation rather than burial because of various practical considerations, such as the shortage of land, increase in human population, and savings in funeral costs which can then be channeled towards more meaningful needs such as charity.

The deceased should be bathed, cleaned and dressed by the family members, rather than by strangers. This would be meaningful because the body is that of our loved one, and the very least we can do is to handle it gently with love and respect. The body can be dressed in clothes which need not be grand or formal, but which the deceased had liked to wear when he was alive. A male body can be bathed and dressed by male family members, and a female body by female members. We should not feel any fear for a dead body, especially as it is the body of our loved one.

There is also no point in putting any jewellery on the body. Once, while on funeral chanting, I noticed undertakers adorning the deceased's body with special made-for-the-dead rings and earrings. This is even more ironical and meaningless, considering that in whatever rebirth the deceased may take, he (or she) is not going to take anything at all along with him except the sum of his good and bad deeds.

When handling the body, such as removing it from the bed and arranging it in the casket, it can again be done by family members. And as always the body should be respectfully and gently handled. The practice of turning one's back towards the deceased as he is lowered into the casket, or as his casket is taken into the hearse, is to me an odd thing. The deceased is our loved one and we ourselves should, in the first place, be placing his body gently into the casket, or to look on with respect as it is being done so by others. To turn away and show one's back to the deceased is to me a mark of disrespect! I can't help thinking that if I were the deceased I would be offended to be treated in such a manner.

This practice of turning away is just another superstition. Why should we fear any ill-luck befalling us if we do not conform to such taboos? As Buddhists we should have confidence in *kamma* which is our true refuge and support. Good begets good and bad begets bad. We should fear bad deeds, such as breaking of our precepts, as such bad deeds will bring about suffering. The last thing we need to fear are superstitions and unfounded taboos.

The casket too need not be an expensive one. It should be placed in the hall of the house with some flowers nicely arranged around it and a photograph of the deceased. Some meaningful Dhamma words, passage or saying can be put up for reflection.

No wreaths need be sent. Instead, in lieu of wreaths, donations should be sent to charities which can be specified by the family members of the deceased. Whatever expense that is saved by holding a simple and meaningful funeral can also be channeled to charity.

Food need not be offered before the deceased's casket, for as we have explained, the deceased will not be able to partake of it. Burning of paper money, joss paper, etc, is also meaningless and should not be done at all. Lighting of candles and joss-sticks are also unnecessary. In fact, the very many superstitious practices and taboos that normally accompany a traditional Chinese ceremony should all be discarded, bearing in mind the Buddha's words that a true lay-follower of his has five qualities: "He has faith; he is morally disciplined; **he does not believe in superstitious omens; he relies on kamma, not on omens;** he does not seek spiritually worthy persons outside of here (ie. outside of the Buddha's dispensation) and he shows honour here first (ie. he has respect for the Buddha's dispensation and should not subject himself to un-Buddhistic practices)."

Wearing of mourning clothes is unnecessary. The Buddha does not want us to mourn or grieve but to accept the fact of separation and death with wisdom and equanimity. *Soka* or grief is an unwholesome state of mind and it is to be overcome through mindfulness and wise reflection. Thus, the *anagami* and *arahant* (who have attained the third and fourth stages of sainthood respectively) are incapable of mourning and grieving. When the Buddha died, the monks who had attained anagamihood or arahathood, shed not a tear. Understanding the nature of impermanence, they did not grieve even though the Buddha was passing away before their eyes.

Neither did the Buddha grieve when his two chief disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana, died within two weeks of each other, about six months before him. The Buddha himself remarked: “Marvellous it is, most wonderful it is, monks, concerning the Perfect Ones that when such a pair of disciples have passed away there is no grief, no lamentation on the part of the Perfect One.” And the Buddha added: “For of that which is born, come to being, put together, and so is subject to dissolution, how should it be said that it should not depart? That, indeed, is not possible. Therefore, monks, be ye an island unto yourselves, a refuge unto yourselves seeking no external refuge; with the Teaching as your island, the Teaching your refuge, seeking no other refuge.”

*Grief is not suppressed, but acknowledged and dispersed through mindfulness and understanding.*

So if we can bear in mind the Buddha’s teaching, we can remain calm in the face of grief. Here we should emphasize that we are not saying that you should suppress your grief by force, ignore or deny its existence. No, that too would be an unskillful approach.

Our approach then is to acknowledge and observe our sorrowful state of mind. Through mindfulness and wise reflection, we can contain our grief and become calm. Mindfulness and understanding is the middle and best way - it involves neither suppression nor giving vent to negative and destructive emotions. Mindfulness is acknowledgment and observation, out of which understanding, acceptance, reconciliation and wisdom can arise. We do not deny or suppress our emotions. We acknowledge and observe them.

In that acknowledgment and observation, we can better cope with the turmoil and conflict that may be going on in our mind. We can exercise wise reflection on the nature of impermanence, suffering and no-self. We can draw from the wisdom of the ancients, and thereby come to terms with our grief. In other words, wisdom can arise. We can understand and accept our sorrow. And it will not take control over our mind or overwhelm us. This is what we mean when we say the gentle application of mindfulness leads to understanding and self-composure.

In this way, we will not be wailing our heart out. We can observe the emotion of grief in us, and it can be contained quite naturally, without us having to give gross outward expression to it. There will be calmness, acceptance and understanding. Even if we should lose our control and cry, we can do so in a somewhat restrained manner. We will eventually regain our control and calm down. Mindfulness will come to our aid, and help us to reconcile with our grief. We will understand the fact of suffering, the truth of what the Buddha and other wise teachers had taught, and we can smile again.

Coming back to the subject of mourning, we can see that in the context of wisdom and non-grieving, the wearing of mourning clothes is unnecessary. It doesn't mean that we are not filial, or that we love our loved ones less, if we do not wear mourning clothes. No, we still have great respect for our loved ones but we do not see any merits in making a public and superfluous show of our grief. Respect and grief are here a very private matter. They are felt in our hearts and we are not bound to make a public show of them.

Rather than emphasizing on outward and superfluous forms of mourning, filial piety should be associated with actions towards elders while they are alive. Deeds speak for themselves.

It would be most unfortunate if some people think that elaborate funeral rites and rituals and the wearing of mourning clothes, can serve as a redemption for deeds of love and care not showered upon the deceased when he or she was living.

Nevertheless, in line with the decorum for a solemn occasion, “solemn” clothes can be worn. One can select some appropriate dark, white or plain-coloured clothing from one’s wardrobe. That to my mind should suffice, though the deceased person, if he had been a joyful and understanding Buddhist, might not even want us to wear “mournful” clothings but to rejoice that he had led a good life and had gone on to a better rebirth. So a person could, before his death, stipulate that he does not want any mourning and superstitious practices but just a simple funeral. He can delegate a responsible person to see that all his wishes are carried out. He can have it all written down on paper and signed in the presence of witnesses so that all concerned would know and abide by his wishes.

The general atmosphere in the house and throughout the funeral should be one of serenity and understanding. Unbecoming activities such as drinking and gambling should definitely not be allowed. All should be respectful and conduct themselves with due decorum. Meaningful passages from the Buddhist scriptures can be read from time to time and reflected upon by the family members and all those present. One person can lead in the reflection. If all concerned have a good understanding of the Dhamma, they would be able to contain their grief. The more stoical can comfort those who are grieving. In this way a peaceful and understanding atmosphere can come about during the whole proceedings. And those present can also feel further resolved and motivated to strive harder in their spiritual quest, and to live with more love and compassion.

A service for the deceased can be conducted in the house. Senior family members can lead in the service, during which the life and good deeds of the deceased can be recounted. Children can recount the great kindness and love of their parents,\* and resolve to lead an exemplary life in their memory.

A monk too can be invited to give a pertinent Dhamma talk. Meditation sessions can also be held in the hall. It would be both a meritorious deed and a mark of respect for the deceased. The deceased, if he had been a staunch meditator, would surely be very happy if he could know that everybody was sitting around his casket, meditating. If he has been reborn in heaven and could see what was going on, I am sure he would be delighted. I, for one, will be very delighted if I were to look down and see people all meditating around my casket. I will be pleased to no end. And if possible I will come down and sit happily in meditation with everybody but, of course, you must pardon me: I know I'm giving free rein to my imagination.

On the day of the cremation, all the merits that have been made can again be shared. A list of the charities that have benefited from the donations received can also be read out. A meaningful service can be conducted at the crematorium just before the casket is pushed into the incinerator. Meaningful passages can be recited from the scriptures. They can be about the impermanence of life, the inevitability of death and the need to live a good life, to meditate and to serve our fellowmen. It might be even more edifying if the service be specially composed and read out for the occasion. It would be good if a monk can lead

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\* In this regard, parents may well take to heart the reality that deeds outlive the physical life. A life well-lived will be the best legacy they can leave behind for their children. A legacy that will both inspire and provide dignity to their inheritors. The fragrance of their exemplary deeds and life will remain long after they are gone.

the whole service but if that is not possible, then a senior member of the family, relative or friend can take the initiative.

After the cremation, what should we do with the ashes? In Buddhist Burma I am told that usually a body is cremated to ashes, which is then left to be disposed of by the crematorium attendants. The relatives do not collect the ashes as it is believed that the deceased had immediately on death taken a new rebirth, and the body left behind is just an empty shell. The Chinese practice in Malaysia, however, is to keep urns containing the ashes in temples or columbariums at substantial cost. My personal feeling is that there is no point to keep the ashes as it doesn't serve much purpose, there being no need at all to make any offerings or perform any services before the ashes. For, as we know from the Dhamma, the ashes is merely elements of inanimate matter while the consciousness has taken on a new rebirth, a new body in some new existence. So I would concur with the Burmese Buddhist way of leaving the ashes behind. If we want to remember and honour the deceased, we should live a good life and do good deeds in his memory. On anniversary of his death too, we can offer *dana* (food and gifts) at the temples, or make donations to charities.

All the proposals with regard to funerals that I have made above are, I believe, more meaningful and significant than present practices. But of course it is up to the reader to decide for himself or herself. These are just my feelings, the way I look at it. I understand that others may feel differently. They may disagree with me and they have every right to do so. For it has always been my firm belief that no-one should impose his or her views on another. We all have a mind of our own and must be allowed to think and decide for ourselves.

Therefore I must make it very clear here that I am not

imposing my views on anybody. Instead I am just expressing and sharing them. And I leave it to each person to decide for himself or herself what he or she would like to believe or follow. Each person must feel free to do as he or she deems fit. Furthermore, in deciding on a funeral after a person has died, there should be discussion and concensus among the family members. It is best therefore that a person, before he dies, makes clear the type of funeral he desires. And it should preferably be done in writing, signed and witnessed. Then there would be no quibble after his death. Family members should respect and follow his wishes.

Of course, the suggestions I have given are not all-comprehensive. They have not covered all the details and aspects of a funeral. They are just a rough framework, just some food for thought. There can be other variations too. It will therefore be good if a team of like-minded and respected Buddhists can sit down and formulate a simple Buddhist funeral covering all aspects and details, and answering all the questions that may be raised. Firstly, what should be looked at are our present practices. What are they? What are their significance? Do we know and understand what we are doing? Why do we practise them? Do they make sense? Are they in line with the Dhamma? Or are they superstitious practices or practices which cannot be reconciled with our understanding of the Dhamma as preached by the Buddha?

From what I can see, many of the present practices in a Chinese family, which professes the Buddhist way of life, cannot be reconciled with the Dhamma. It would appear that many people just follow funeral rites without any idea of what they are all about. They just follow instructions without question or understanding. They are, at the time of the funeral, really quite confused and distraught. They just follow what they are told to

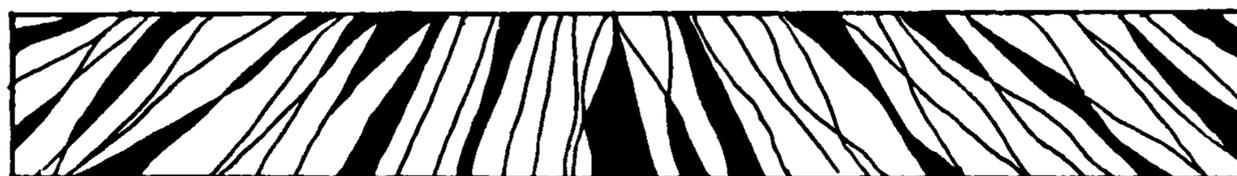
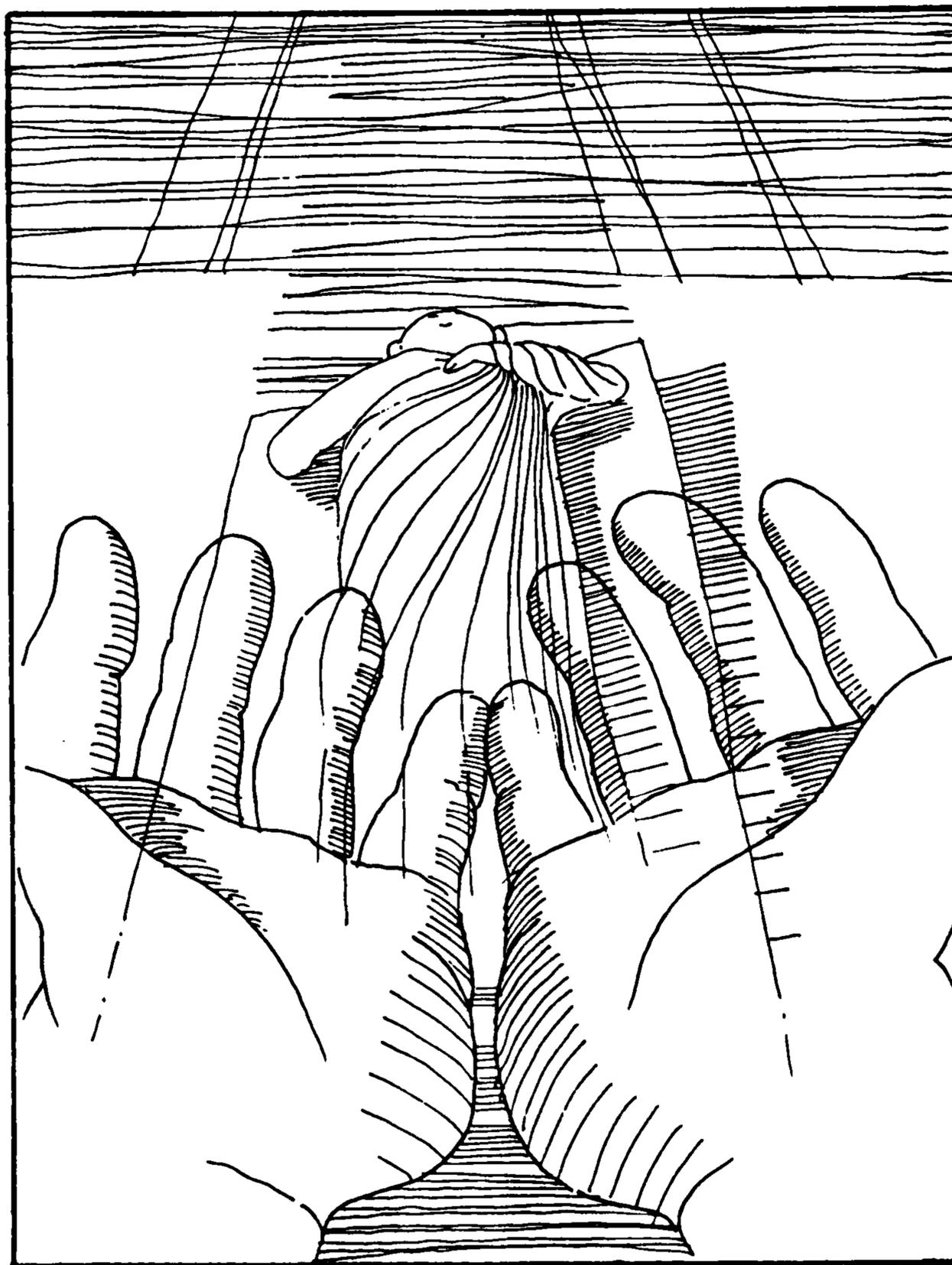
do because it is the tradition and they can't possibly go against it without being criticised and accused of being unfilial and so on. So there is really no meaningful participation. To me, it all seems quite pathetic. Ignorance and resignation to whatever is being conducted seems to be the order of the day.

So a team of respected Buddhists looking into all these practices can come up with meaningful alternatives in line with the Buddha Dhamma. Details of the proposed funeral service with various options can be drawn up after having conducted a thorough study of the local situation. A comprehensive book providing all the various funeral options and necessary information can then be compiled and published. Such a project will be a great service to the Buddhist community who are often confused as to what constitutes a proper Buddhist funeral.

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### *As for me*

As for my own funeral, I have given due thought as to how I would like my own body to be disposed after death. The body is actually nothing more than a corpse after death. It will just return to the earth. So I might as well do one last good deed with it – ie. donate it to the hospital. Doctors can remove the cornea from my eyes and give the wonderful gift of sight to a blind person. Imagine what joy it is for one who is blind to be able to see again, and how precious such a gift would be to him. And imagine how happy I would be too, to know that I have given him this gift of sight. This gift too is no sacrifice on my part at all, as the body is of no more use to me after death. So I might as well do one last good deed with it before it decomposed.



*And they can have my body – my eyes, my heart,  
my lungs, my liver, my kidneys . . . .*

If possible, the doctors should also remove my heart, kidneys, lungs, liver and whatever organs that could after my death be transplanted to others. And whatever is left may be of benefit to medical students in their studies. They could do dissection practice on it. Later, they could dispose what remains of the body as they wish. Perhaps it could become fertilizer for the soil and some plant can grow into a strong tree that provides shade and pretty flowers. In this way too, nobody need to worry about giving me a so-called proper funeral. Everybody can just leave it to the hospital to dispose of everything as they deem fit. It will make it so much easier for everybody. It will, so to speak, take a load off their mind. No-one need to be unnecessarily inconvenienced on my account.

And if anybody speaks about a proper funeral for me and the paying of last respects, I will say: Please do not bother about all that. A funeral is not for me. But if you really wish to remember me, then do a good deed. Do any good deed you like in my memory. Live a good life. Be caring and sharing. Be forgiving and loving. Be generous and big-hearted. Be kind and gentle. That is all that I ask. That will make me very happy – to know that I have been able to spread some good message and be of some good influence.

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*Monks, a monk should meet his end  
mindful and clearly comprehending.  
That is our instruction to you.*

**Buddha**

# OUR DEATH SHOULD BE SERENE

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*All* of us have to die one day. Our death should be serene and peaceful. Therefore when someone is about to die we should make it as serene and beautiful for him or her as possible. Yes, are you surprised that death can be beautiful? If you are, it is because we normally have *dosa* or aversion towards death. There is fear of pain and the uncertainty of what is to come after death. Then there is attachment to our loved ones which gives rise to much pain in our heart in having to part with them.

We should however realize that our wrong understanding and attitude is the cause of our suffering. We have not understood the *Dhamma* deeply enough. We have not understood and penetrated the nature of mind and body as impermanence, suffering and no-self. We have not learned how to let go gracefully, how to submit to the inevitable.

When the Buddha's stepmother Maha Pajapati Gotami was about to die at the ripe old age of 120, Ananda and the nuns cried. Maha Pajapati Gotami gently reproached them: "But why should you cry, my son and daughters. Don't you see this body of



*The Buddha's last words were:  
"All conditioned things are subject to dissolution.  
You should strive on with diligence."*

mine has become old and decrepit? It is like a haunt of snakes, a seat of diseases, a resort of old age and death, a house of suffering. Weary have I grown with this corpse of a body. It has been nothing but a great burden to me. Long have I aspired for the liberation of Nibbana. And today my wish is about to be realized. Truly my death is a happy thing. It is the time for me to beat the drum of satisfaction and joy. Why then should you cry?"

The Buddha, as he was dying amidst natural surroundings under two *sal* trees in the forest, also told Ananda not to cry at his death. He said one must with wisdom and equanimity accept the fact that death and separation from all that we love is inevitable. The Buddha reminded that we must practise mindfulness meditation to attain the wisdom that can enable us to face death with serenity. He told the monks: "Thus must you train yourselves: We must meet our death mindful and composed." And the Buddha's last words were: "All conditioned things are subject to dissolution. You should strive on with diligence."

People who have lived beautiful lives can die beautifully. The other day I came across a very touching *In Memoriam* in the newspaper: "As she breathed her last and entered into eternal life, her face lit up and her lips broke into a lovely smile. Sister F., on seeing this, exclaimed: 'Look, she's seeing God...'" It so happened I know this lady, a Christian, who had died such a beautiful death. She had a very gentle and kind nature and was always concerned for the welfare of others. I was told that as a school teacher she used to seek out the especially weak students and gave them special coaching and encouragement. She was deeply loved and cherished by her family and by all those whose lives had been touched by hers. I am told that she had always been such a gentle and loving person to everybody that verily her life was just like

that of a saint.

Having lived such a beautiful life, it is no wonder that she died a beautiful death. Our religions may vary but as the Dalai Lama, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, puts it: "Compassion is the essence of all religions." It is my firm belief that if we have lived a good life, then when we die we will die a beautiful death whether we are Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Muslims or of whatever views or beliefs. As the Buddha says, it is deeds that maketh a person. In this context I used to tell Buddhists that it is better to be a good Christian or good Muslim than to be a bad Buddhist. Thus, good Christians when they die may see their God or the light. Buddhists too may see mental images of the Buddha, arahants, devas or heavenly realms and radiant light.

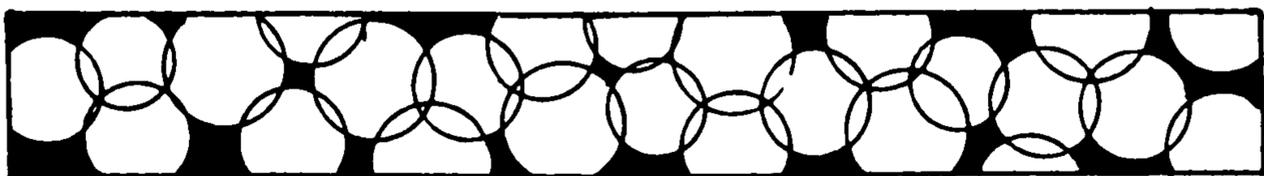
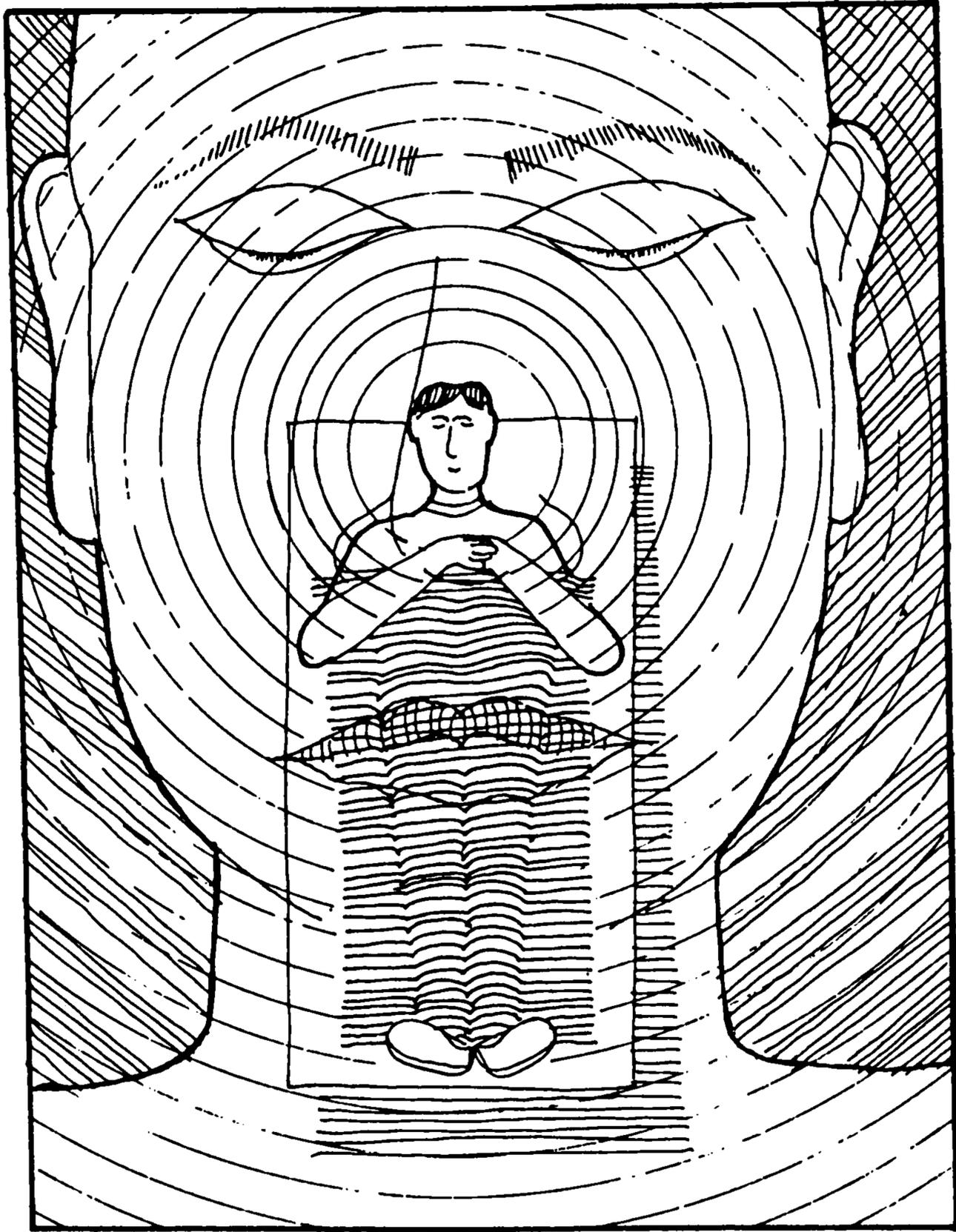
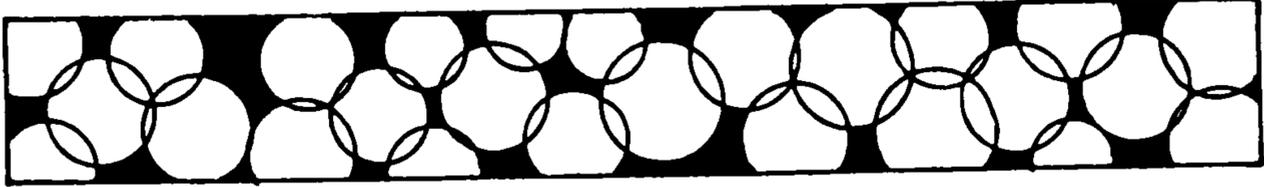
Jack Kornfield, the American Vipassana meditation teacher, once related in the *Inquiring Mind* journal how he visited Howard Nudleman, a very kind surgeon and meditator a day before the latter died of cancer. He recollected how walking into Howard's room was like walking into a temple. And when he looked at Howard, Howard gave him a smile, a smile of such incredible sweetness, that he (Kornfield) would never be able to forget it for the rest of his life.

Yes, I am sure touching stories about beautiful deaths of beautiful people abound. Therefore, death too can be a beautiful experience. When we have lived a good life and this body has become frail and broken down, we can face death gracefully, knowing that we have lived a good life and that it is time for us to move on.

So when a loved one is about to die, we should understand and allow him (or her) to go peacefully. We should make it as serene and beautiful for him as possible. Obviously, we shouldn't

be crying or wailing. That would only make it more difficult for the dying person. Of course if he is an understanding Buddhist and there is still strength in him to speak, he might, just like the Buddha, gently chide you: "But my dear why should you cry? Has not the Buddha taught us in many a way that separation is inevitable in life? How can it be that what is subject to dissolution should not dissolve? That is not possible. Therefore we should contemplate deeply on the Dhamma. This body, my dear, is not ours. This mind too is not ours. They arise and pass away according to conditions. We must practise mindfulness deeply to see this, so that, clinging no more, we can be liberated from birth and death. My dear, be strong. Even as I take my leave of you I will like to remind you of the Buddha's last words to us all: 'All conditioned phenomena are subject to dissolution. Therefore, I exhort you, strive on with diligence.'"

Yes, all Buddhists should remember that the Buddha's last reminder to us was to strive on untiringly to attain the wisdom that can liberate us from birth and death. A meditator should meditate to the very end. He can observe his in-breath or out-breath or the rising and falling of the abdomen as he breathes in and out. If he experiences any difficulties he can be aware of them, noting them as they are, without any fear or anxiety, but with calmness and steadiness of mind. He can observe painful sensations and bear them even if they are intense. He can remind himself that they are merely sensations, albeit difficult ones. He can see too that they are impermanent, that they continually arise and pass away. He can understand and not cling or be attached to the body. He knows that both the body and mind arise and pass away according to conditions. He can reflect: "This mind and body are not mine. They have never belonged to me. They arise because of conditions and, according to conditions, they will pass away. Accordingly, this eye is not mine, this ear is not mine,



*This body is not mine . . . .*  
*This mind is not mine . . . .*

this nose is not mine.....This body is made up of the four elements of earth, fire, water and air which represent the qualities of matter, the qualities of hardness, softness, pressure, tension, heat, cold and so on. As long as there is kammic energy to sustain my lifespan for this life, this body will survive. When the kammic energy for this life expires, then this body dies, and a new mind conditioned by the old mind at the moment of death, arises in a new body. If I had attained arahatship, there is no need for anymore rebirth. If I have not but has, nevertheless, lived a good life, I am not afraid of a new rebirth. I can take on a new existence as a well-endowed and intelligent human or a heavenly being and from there continue my path of development until I attain the ultimate Nibbana, the end of birth and death.”

Reflecting in this way, a meditator can become very calm and steady. He can become very peaceful. He can even smile at his pain and at the people that may be gathered around him. With his mind being so peaceful, painful bodily sensations too can cease. He can die in serenity and peace, gently breathing his last.



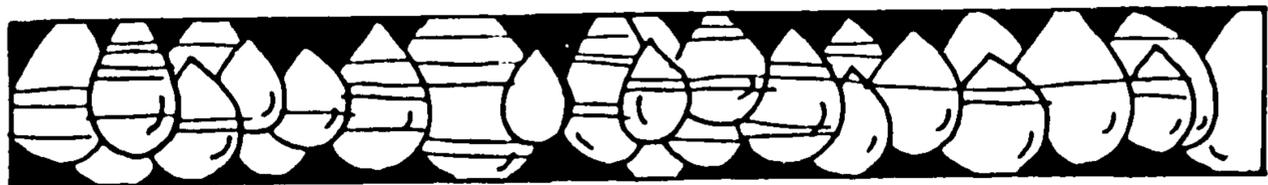
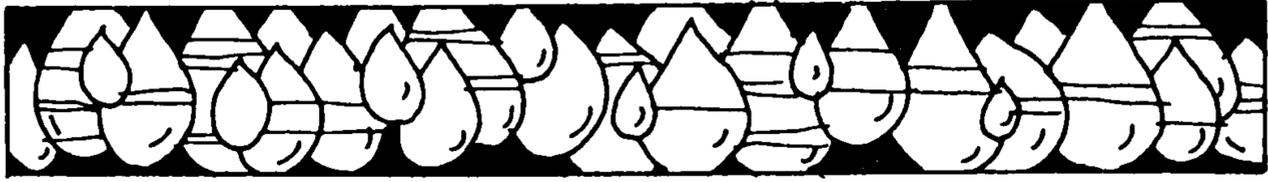
## *Tears of joy*

When Anathapindika, the philanthropist and great benefactor of the *Sangha*, was dying, Sariputta, the Buddha's chief disciple, preached a discourse on non-attachment to him. Sariputta reminded Anathapindika that life was merely a process dependent on conditions, and that in this transient mind and body there is nothing which is worth clinging to. Sariputta went through a whole list of what life constitutes, showing that they are all ephemeral conditions which cannot be clung to. Therefore Anathapindika should not grasp after visual forms and the eye,

sound and the ear, scent and the nose, taste and the tongue, touch and the body, and the consciousness that is dependent on all of these. Anathapindika should not grasp after seeing consciousness, hearing consciousness, smelling consciousness, tasting consciousness, touching consciousness and thinking consciousness. He should understand their impermanent nature and observe their arising and passing away, without clinging to or being averse to them.

Similarly Anathapindika should not grasp after the contact dependent on eye and form, ear and sound and so on. He should not grasp after the feeling, whether pleasant or unpleasant, that arose dependent on the contact. He was to treat them all with equanimity, understanding their true nature of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and no-self. The body is made up of the four elements of extension, oscillation, cohesion and temperature. The mind is made of feeling, perception, mental activities and consciousness. They are all impermanent and changing all the time. Anathapindika, Sariputta exhorted, should not be attached to any of these. There is nothing in the world which can be called a permanent self. There is, in the ultimate sense, no self in this mind and body. And therefore there is nothing for Anathapindika to cling to.

On hearing this profound Dhamma, a great peace and joy came over Anathapindika. And he cried. The Buddha's attendant monk, Ananda, who was present was taken aback and asked Anathapindika why he cried. "Was it because he was not able to bear up with his pain?" "No," Anathapindika replied. It was not that. But rather it was because the discourse was so beautiful that it had touched him very deeply. "I have never felt so touched in my life. That is why I cried," he told Ananda and Sariputta. His tears were not tears of sorrow, but tears of joy - joy at hearing



*Anathapindika shed tears of joy on hearing the profound Dhamma preached by Sariputta.*

and understanding such profound Dhamma.

Anathapindika asked why such Dhamma was not often preached to the lay-people. Sariputta replied it was because the lay-people normally found it difficult to appreciate such deep Dhamma, being attached, as they were, to the very many sensual pleasures available in life. Anathapindika protested that there were those who would understand and appreciate the deep Dhamma and who, for not hearing it, would be lost. He urged Sariputta to preach often to others the discourse on non-attachment which Sariputta had just preached to him.

Shortly after Anathapindika died. As his end was peaceful and he had lived a good life, he was said by the Buddha to have been reborn in the Tusita heaven. As one who has attained the first stage of sainthood (*sotapatti*) it is believed that Anathapindika would, within seven lives, attain full enlightenment and thereby be liberated from rebirth.

There are stories too of how monks in the old days attained arahatship (full enlightenment) on their deathbed. So too yogis of today can meditate to the very end, so that for all they know they might realize insight knowledges, deepening their understanding of impermanence, suffering and no-self, and even attaining sainthood at the moment of death.

A yogi too can radiate *metta*, loving-kindness. Even as he is dying, he can radiate thoughts of loving-kindness to all beings. "May all beings be happy. May they be free from harm and danger. May they be free from mental suffering ..... physical suffering ..... may they take care of themselves happily." Dying with such noble thoughts of love for all beings is a noble way of dying. In the *Visuddhimagga*, a classic Buddhist meditation manual, it is stated that a person who is in the habit of radiating

metta, will die very peacefully, as if falling into a pleasant sleep. And if he has not attained arahatship and has thus to be reborn, he may be reborn in a heavenly realm.

Yes, a yogi need not fear death. He can gracefully give up the body and mind knowing that life and death are just two sides of the same coin, understanding that while we are alive we are already dying from moment to moment, dying to each passing moment and being reborn into each new moment. Mental and physical phenomena are constantly arising and passing away. Nothing stays the same even for a second. This has been proven too in quantum physics where it was found that subatomic particles vanish at a rate of 10 to the power of 22 times in just one second. The Buddha too said that mental and physical phenomena are constantly arising and dissolving. As long as we have not eliminated the kammic-rebirth energy by uprooting the mental defilements of greed, anger and delusion, so long will we continue to take new birth. Dying in this life just means the end of the lifespan for the body and mind in this life. But immediately on expiry of the death-moment mind, without any interval, a new mind arises taking on a new body according to the kamma or deeds of the being in his previous life. So a yogi understanding that the death-moment mind is basically no different from that of any other mind-moment would have no fear. He can meet his end mindful and composed in line with the instruction of the Buddha.

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### *Making the atmosphere serene*

In making the atmosphere serene for a dying person, we should know his preferences, his likes and dislikes. For example, he may like flowers. Then we should have flowers in the room by his

bedside. He would probably like to pass away in his own cosy room, in surroundings that are familiar and peaceful to him. So if it is possible, he should have his end at home rather than in a hospital. But if that is not possible and hospital care is required, we should try to make his surroundings in the hospital as private and peaceful as possible. A private room is best but not all people may be able to afford it. Whatever the place may be, we should try to make the atmosphere as peaceful as possible.

He might have a small Buddha image which he likes to gaze at. If so we can place the image beside the flowers at his bedside. The serene countenance of a Buddha image can be very reassuring. By looking at the image, one is reminded of the Buddha's wisdom and teaching. And that can give much comfort and peace, especially in times of need. The room too should be clean and cosy. The dying person might like his bed to be placed facing the window so he can see trees and plants which can be soothing to the heart. (The Buddha, for example, chose to pass away in natural surroundings, under two *sal* trees which were in bloom in Kusinara forest.)

If perchance the dying person should lose his steadiness and show signs of fear, anxiety or pain, relatives should reassure him. For example, a loved one can hold his hand or gently stroke his forehead, speaking in soothing and reassuring terms. She can remind him gently of the Dhamma, the need to keep the mind calm and to meditate. She can assure him not to worry about her or the children, that she has the teachings of the Buddha and that she will live by the teachings. She will know how to take care of herself and the children. She can remind him that property, loved ones and mind-and-body are ultimately not ours. Only our deeds are our true property that will follow us. She can remind him of the good life he had led, of the good care he had taken of

the family, and of the many good deeds he had done. Recollecting thus, and understanding the Dhamma, he can become strong. He can smile and be at peace. Death is no more frightening to him.

Of course, what we have stated is just an example of one possible scenario. When the time comes there can be no prepared script. But if one understands the Dhamma one can respond intuitively and, according to the prevailing conditions, say and do just the right thing to help a loved one die peacefully.

During the Buddha's time, Nakulamata, the wife of Nakulapita, did just that: she reassured her husband when he was at one time close to dying. She told him: "My dear, do not die with any regret or attachment to anything. Our Lord, the Buddha, had said that it is unwise to die in such manner." Understanding her husband's nature, she continued: "My dear, you might think that when you are gone, I will not be able to support the children or keep the family together. But think not so; for I am deft at spinning cotton and carding wool. I can support the children and keep the family together. Therefore be at peace."

And she reassured her husband that she would remain virtuous and practise the Dhamma until she attained enlightenment. And if anyone should doubt this, let them go and ask the Buddha, who she was certain would express confidence in her. Hearing all these assurances, Nakulapita instead of dying felt very much better and recovered from his illness! Later, when the loving couple went to see the Buddha, the Lord told Nakulapita that he was very lucky to have a wife like Nakulamata. "You are very fortunate to have Nakulamata who had such love and compassion for you, who desire your happiness and who can counsel you in times of crisis."

Relatives too should give all the support they can to the dying. As has been said earlier, they should not cry as that would make it difficult for the dying person. But if they have difficulty in controlling themselves, then they too should contemplate on the Dhamma. They can contemplate that death is inseparable from life. When there is life there must be death. It is something we must accept gracefully. Besides when the body is decrepit or terminally ill, it is quite a relief to be “freed” from it. Taking on a new life, the person will be better off. Thinking in a wise way too, relatives can regain their composure and help give the dying person a dignified and serene departure.

### *The last thought-moment*

The last thought-moment or the death moment is said to be very vital. If one dies with fear, anger, craving or any other unwholesome mental state, then a bad rebirth will come about. But if one dies with peace and understanding, with mindfulness and equanimity, a good rebirth will come about. Usually if one has led a good life the last thought-moment will quite naturally be a wholesome one. The good deeds one has done may appear to the mind’s eye. Or one may have visions of the destiny one is going to, such as the seeing of breathtaking heavenly scenery and beautiful people. Conversely, if one has led an evil life, then the evil deeds one has done may appear before one’s eye, or visions of hell-fire and other bad omens may be seen. In life though, we are not all good or all bad; there is a mixture of bad and good in us. But if on the whole we have been good, then we can be confident of getting a good rebirth.

If we have a good understanding of life and death, we can meet death with steadiness and equanimity. We can, as we have

said, meditate to the very end, maintaining our mindfulness and composure. Having lived a generally good life and furthermore, being able to maintain mindfulness in the face of death, we can certainly be assured of a good rebirth – as a good human being again or as a *deva*, a heavenly being. Hopefully too we can quickly, in whatever rebirth we have taken, make an end of *samsara*, the round of birth and death, so that subject no more to rebirth, we will attain the peace of Nibbana.

Sometimes the question may be asked: What if a person is unable to maintain mindfulness, especially if he has not undergone any meditation training? What if, let us say, he dies in a coma? Or what if he dies suddenly in an accident? From my understanding of the scriptures as taught by the Buddha, I would say that if one has led a good life, then chances are some good thought-moment will surface at the moment of death and a good rebirth can come about. Our *kamma* is our true refuge (*kamma-patisarana*), so accordingly the sum-weight of the good deeds we have done should lead us to a good rebirth. That is why we should lead a good life while we are alive, and not wait until we are near death, for it would be much too late then. But as in life we have done both some bad and good, there is the possibility that we might unskillfully recollect the bad deeds instead of the good ones at the moment of death. Therefore maintaining mindfulness is all important; it is very helpful. With mindfulness, unwholesome thoughts will not be able to enter our mind and we can pass away calmly, peacefully. Mindfulness being such a wonderful quality – being able to help us in both life and death – why then should we not cultivate and thoroughly develop it while we are alive?

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*A monk devoted to mindfulness of death is constantly diligent. He acquires perception of disenchantment with all kinds of becoming (existence). He conquers attachment to life. He condemns evil. He avoids much storing. He has no stain of avarice about requisites. Perception of impermanence grows in him, following upon which there appear the perception of pain and not-self. But while beings who have not developed mindfulness of death fall victims to fear, horror and confusion at the time of death as though suddenly seized by wild beasts, spirits, snakes, robbers, or murderers, he dies undeluded and fearless without falling into any such state. And if he does not attain the deathless here and now, he is at least headed for a happy destiny on the break-up of the body.*

The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)

# CONTEMPLATION ON DEATH

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*While* we are alive it is good to contemplate on death now and then. In fact it is good to do it daily. The Buddha recommends frequent contemplation on death because there are many benefits to be gained from such contemplation. Let's look at how we can benefit in contemplating on death.

First we must make it clear that by contemplating on death, we do not mean that you must become morose, frightened, morbid or depressed, and feel like killing yourself. No, far from all these, we mean that you should, in contemplating *wisely* on death, be able to live even more wisely and compassionately.

For example, whenever I should get annoyed or frustrated I would (if I am not too unmindful) contemplate along these lines: *Life is short, soon we will all be dead.* So what's the use of quarrelling or arguing with anyone? What's the use of getting all heated up? No point at all. It is better that I keep my peace. Arguing or getting heated up would not solve the problem. It causes only more animosity and vexation. Thinking in this way I can cool down, check myself from being carried away by strong feelings, and relate more gently and skillfully with others. Of course, it is not always easy and sometimes (perhaps many times) I do forget and get carried away with rhetorics and emotions, but whenever I remind myself about the brevity of life and the

pointlessness of getting all fired up, I can cool down somewhat and speak with more gentleness and restraint.

Similarly, when I should be agitated or worried about something, I would think what's the use of all these worrying and anxiety. Life will take its natural course and death awaits each and everyone of us. No-one in the world can escape death. Death is the great equalizer, the great leveller. Therefore, while I am alive, it is better for me to live as best I could, and that means living in accordance with the Dhamma, living mindfully, from moment to moment, day to day, just doing the best I can, one day at a time. Thinking in such wise too, I can check worries and live more lightly and happily.

Furthermore, we can consider that with or without worries, all of us still have to grow old and die. So we might as well grow old without the worries! That will be the smarter thing to do. Nobody will disagree that we'll surely be better off without the worries. On the other hand, all the worrying might even shorten our life, cause us to develop a premature illness and die. Thinking in this way too, we can check our worries and live happier lives. Thus, thinking about death in a skilful way can cause us to be more tolerant and patient, kinder and gentler, both with ourselves and others.

Then we can also become less attached to our material possessions, less greedy. Yes, when we can perceive deeply the brevity of life, and how no matter how much we may have acquired we cannot take even one cent along with us when we die, we can become less tight-fisted. We can loosen a little and start to enjoy sharing and giving, loving and caring. We will realize then that there is more to life than just accumulating and hoarding wealth. We will like to be more generous, to share and to bring joy and happiness into the lives of others. Bringing joy

and happiness to others is what makes life meaningful and beautiful. That is what counts. Love and compassion can grow and flower in us like the beautiful blooms of a tree. We can become truly beautiful people that are steeped in compassion, responding from the heart without any discrimination of race, sect, religion, social status, etc. Our life will take on a new shine and we can then say we are truly happy and human. And when death comes we shall have no regrets. We can die happily and peacefully, with a smile.



### *When four mountains come a-rolling*

The Buddha once told a simile with regard to death to impress upon us the need to live a meaningful life. He posed this question to King Pasenadi: “What would you do, O King, if you are told that four huge mountains, one each from the north, south, east and west, are heading in the direction of your kingdom, crushing every living thing in sight, and there is no escape?”

King Pasenadi replied: “Lord, in such a mighty disaster, the destruction of human life so great, and rebirth as a human being so hard to obtain, what else can I do save to live a righteous life and do good deeds.” The Buddha then drove home his point: “I tell you, O King, I make it known to you – old age and death are rolling in upon you. Since old age and death are rolling in upon you, what are you going to do?” The King replied that under such circumstances, it was all the more urgent for him to live a righteous life and do good deeds. He also acknowledged that all the power, prestige, wealth and sensual pleasures which he was enjoying as a king would, in the face of death, come to nought.

So when we reflect wisely on death we will realize that wealth,

power, prestige and sensual pleasures are not everything. They cannot guarantee us happiness. Many people have had them and still lived tempestuous and unhappy lives. Some regretted the way they had ill-treated, down-trodden or ruined others in the frenzied pursuit of their worldly ambitions. Having reached the top, they found that the achievement was, after all, not all that satisfying, even hollow and meaningless. Sometimes they wished they had spent more time with their loved ones and friends, that they had shown more care and tenderness. They regretted having neglected their loved ones. Some people having attained a good degree of success, changed their attitude in mid-course. They devoted more time to their loved ones, friends and society and are prepared, for the greater good, to forego their highest ambitions, to settle for less.

If we were to read about how some rich and successful people made a mess of their lives, we might learn a lesson from their mistakes. The other day I read a book entitled, *The World's Wealthiest Losers*. I found it quite an educational book. It was quite aptly titled. They were losers in life despite their wealth. Yes, I learned quite a lot of *Dhamma* from it, about how money and success do not guarantee their owners happiness. Instead they were unhappy despite or because of their wealth and success. Reading about how the rich and famous, such as Howard Hughes, Mario Lanza, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe and Aristotle Onassis, lived and died I do not envy them.

Glamorous personalities like Elvis and Monroe, died from an overdose of drugs, living out the old adage: "From rags to riches, and from riches to emptiness." All their wealth and success could not bring them the happiness they sought. Happiness still eluded them. They seemed quite pathetic, consumed by tantrums, grief, fear and emptiness. Take the case of one heiress, who inherited

an astronomical fortune, married seven times but could not find happiness. She told her biographer: "I inherited everything but love. I've always been seeking for it, because I didn't know what it was." Her first six marriages ended in divorce and her last in separation. In the end, despite her massive wealth she was said to be "just a vulnerable sick woman riddled with loneliness." She died at age 66 with some friends by her bedside, but no husband. Such tragic tales, I'm sure, can be found in the East too.

Of course, in making references to others, we do not mean to be disparaging in a self-righteous way. But we just wanted to emphasize the importance of having the proper values in life, to understand the nature of true love and compassion. We also do not mean to denounce riches and success, or to say that you should not strive for them. No, we are *not* saying that. We *do* understand that we have to be practical and realistic. We understand that if you are working in the world it is only natural you will try your best to acquire as much wealth as possible. After all, if you want to do good and help others, such as building charitable institutions, hospitals and meditation centres and offering almsfood to monks and the needy, you would need money. So we are not saying you should not try as laypeople to enrich yourselves. But of course in acquiring wealth, you should do so through honest means, without harming others.

In other words, what we are emphasizing is the moral balance. We need to have spiritual values, the appreciation that happiness is not in self-indulgence but in sharing and caring. When we have the right values we can live meaningfully and bring joy and happiness to all those who come within the ambience of our lives. When we have understood the Dhamma, especially the truths of impermanence, suffering and no-self, we will not cling to fame or gain. We can live with humility and

compassion, share our wealth and success, and find joy in making others happy. But when we do not have a deep understanding of what constitutes happiness – that true happiness comes from a mind that is liberated from greed, anger and delusion – then because we do not understand we can do the wrong things, be sunk in a sensual mire and come to a miserable end. So it is important that we contemplate well on life and death, and steer in the right direction, the proper course.

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### *A sense of urgency*

Contemplating on death can also bring about what is called *samvega* in Pali – a sense of urgency which can charge us with the energy to do all the good we can before we die and, in particular, to practise meditation to experience the deeper truths and understanding. The Buddha said most people are running up and down the nearer shore; they are not seeking to cross over to the other shore. The Buddha meant that we are all very much entangled in sensual pursuits, in the mundane pleasures of life. We are not seeking to go beyond to the supramundane – to go beyond life and death, to taste the ambrosial nectar of immortal bliss, immortal Nibbana.

What is this Nibbana? The Buddha said it cannot be described but must be experienced by each one for himself or herself. But the Buddha did try to give us some idea of what Nibbana is like. For example, he described it as the unborn, unoriginated, unformed, unconditioned, the deathless, the highest happiness, the greatest peace. Nibbana represents a state of no arising and passing away, no birth or death. It is also described as a blowing out of the fires of greed, hatred and delusion, the cessation of

mind and matter, the extinction of suffering.\*

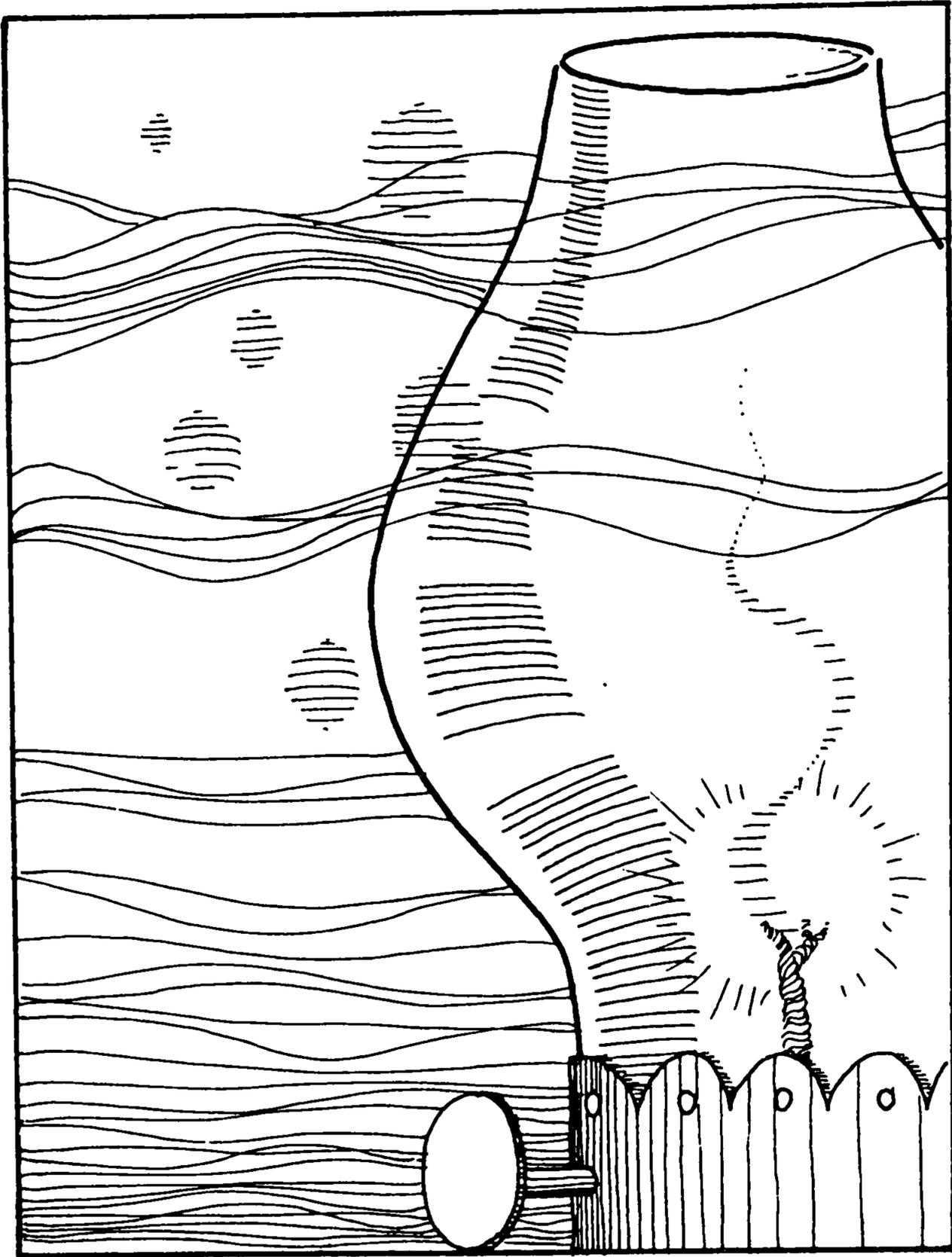
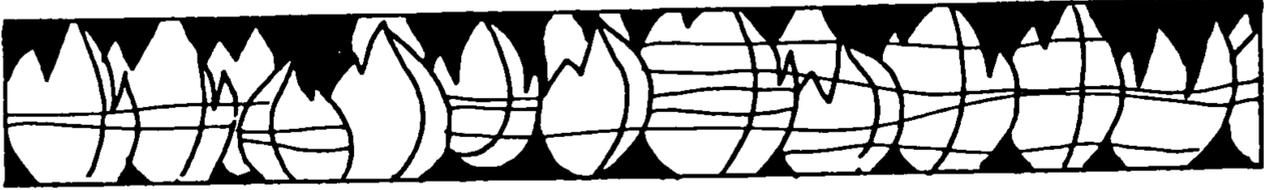
A person who has attained the state of Nibbana, which can be realised in the course of meditation, is said to be enlightened. An enlightened person may be an arahant or a Buddha. The difference between an arahant and a Buddha is that the former gains enlightenment by listening to another enlightened person while a Buddha gains enlightenment by himself.

An enlightened being is a person who can face the vicissitudes of life with an even mind. Through the ups and downs, such as loss and gain, success and failure, praise and blame, pain or pleasure, fame or disrepute, he remains serene and unshakable. He remains this way not because he is deluded or unfeeling, but because he is enlightened and wise; he understands the true nature of existence, the nature of physical and mental phenomena, the nature of their impermanence, insecurity and absence of any core or essence that can be called a self in the ultimate sense. If he does not crave for pleasure or is unaverse to pain, it is not that he does not feel them. He feels them but understanding their true nature he cannot be overwhelmed by them. He can take both pain and pleasure as they come along with wisdom and equanimity.

So too with the other worldly conditions such as praise and blame, and loss and gain. If he is praised he does not get swollen-headed or conceited. He is not elated. If he is blamed he is not upset or depressed. It doesn't matter to him. He is steady and unperturbed because he knows he has acted truly – without the subtlest taints of greed, anger and delusion. He is motivated only by loving-kindness and compassion. He has no desire even to

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\* For further reading on the subject of Nibbana, see *On the nature of Nibbana* by Mahasi Sayadaw, published by Buddha Sasana Nuggaha Organisation, Rangoon, Burma.



*The wise go out like a lamp.*

harm an ant or a mosquito. His conscience is clear, his mind is light and free. An arahant lives out his last life on this earth and when he dies he undergoes no more rebirth. He goes out like a lamp. He attains *nirodha* – cessation. He has *parinibbana-ed* – ie. he has attained final Nibbana, the cessation of all existence, the attainment of the Nibbanic element of supreme peace. Thus arahants during the time of the Buddha had this saying:

*I delight not in life  
I delight not in death  
But I await my time  
mindful and composed.*

Another verse goes like this:

*Impermanent are all conditioned things  
Of a nature to arise and pass away  
Having arisen they then pass away  
Their (complete) calming and cessation is true bliss.*

Contemplating on death can release us from the grip of the sensual lure. We will not be deluded by material wealth but will channel our resources towards a more fulfilling and rewarding life, with due regard for the development of wisdom and compassion. We can be spurred to take up meditation or, if we have already done so, to double our efforts to attain the supreme goal of liberation from all suffering.

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## *Contemplation leads to understanding and acceptance*

Frequent contemplation on death – on how it is inevitable and that our true property are our deeds – can spur us to live a good life such that when we die we will have no fear of death.

Furthermore when somebody dear to us die, as inevitably all of us must, grief will not assail us as we have understanding and acceptance. This is not because we are unfeeling or have no heart. No, we have a heart, and a soft one too. We can feel deeply but we also understand the nature of existence, and can accept that death is very much woven into life.

Explaining how the wise can accept death, the Buddha said: “Seeing the nature of the world, the wise do not grieve. Weeping and wailing will only lead to more suffering and pain. It cannot bring back the dead. The mourner becomes pale and thin. He is doing violence to himself and his mourning is pointless.” The Buddha said that the wise man who had truly comprehended the nature of existence has “pulled out the dart of grief and despair.” “He has no clinging. Having obtained peace of mind, he has passed beyond all grief. He is freed.”

So we should contemplate on the deeper aspects of the Buddha’s teachings so that we can face death without grief but with understanding. The departed too would not want us to lose our self-control. They would not want us to suffer a broken heart but to accept their departure gracefully. Having taken a new rebirth, they are also no more present to see us weeping. Our weeping and sorrow cannot help them in any way. So it is futile. If we were to consider more deeply, we may see that our grief is because of our attachment. We cannot bear the parting. But if we can contemplate deeply and become wiser, we can accept the inevitable. Instead of grieving, we can be brave. We can respond meaningfully, say by resolving to live a noble and exemplary life

in honour or in memory of a loved one. A wise person would surely not want us to mourn for him. Instead he or she would say: “If you really want to do me honour or to remember me by, then live a good life, do good deeds, be kind to your fellowman.....That’s all I ask.”

When the Buddha was about to pass away, it was said that heavenly flowers and sandalwood powder fell from the sky and sprinkled all over his body in honour of him. And heavenly music too was heard. But the Buddha indicated that such kind of honour was not what he wanted. “It is not thus that the Tathagatha is honoured in the highest degree,” he said. “But, Ananda, whoever abides by the Dhamma, lives uprightly in the Dhamma, walks in the way of the Dhamma, it is by such a one that the Tathagatha is honoured in the highest degree. Therefore, Ananda, thus should you train yourselves: We shall abide by the Dhamma, live uprightly in the Dhamma, walk in the way of the Dhamma.” And though we have said it before, we would like to say it yet again: The Buddha’s last admonition was: *Vayadhammā sankhārā. Appamādena sampādettha*. All conditioned things are subject to dissolution. Strive on with diligence (for liberation).

### *No lamenting can touch the ashes of the dead*

In his previous lives, the Buddha as a bodhisatta (a Buddha-to-be), also displayed no grief at the death of dear ones. The Buddha was able with his psychic powers to recollect his past lives, and it was said that in one life when he was a farmer, he did not grieve when he lost his only son. Instead, he contemplated: “What is subject to dissolution is dissolved and what is subject to death is dead. All life is transitory and subject to death.” When he was asked by a Brahmin why he did not cry – was he a hard-hearted man, has he

no feeling for his son? – the bodhisatta replied that his son was very dear to him, but grieving would not bring him back. “No lamenting can touch the ashes of the dead. Why should I grieve? He fares the way he had to tread.”

In another life when he did not cry over his brother’s death and was accused by people of being hard-hearted, he replied that they had not understood the eight worldly conditions that all beings faced, to wit, loss and gain, happiness and unhappiness, praise and blame, fame and disrepute. “Because you do not understand the eight worldly conditions you weep and cry. All existent things are transient and must eventually pass away. If you do not understand this, and because of your ignorance you cry and lament, why should I also join you and cry?”

In yet another life, the Bodhisatta shed no tear at the death of his young and beautiful wife. Instead he reflected: “That which has the nature of dissolution is dissolved. All existences are impermanent,” and taking a seat nearby, he ate his food as usual, showing an exceptional ability to live mindfully from moment to moment. The people who gathered around him were amazed and asked how he could at such a time remain so calm. Did he not love his wife who was so beautiful that even those who did not know her could not help but brush away a tear? The Bodhisatta replied in verse:

*Why should I shed tears for thee  
Fair Sammillaḥasini?  
Passed to death’s majority  
You are henceforth lost to me.*

*Why should frail man lament  
What to him is only lent?*

*He too draws his mortal breath  
Forfeit every hour to death.*

*Be he standing, sitting,  
moving, resting, what he will,  
In a twinkling of an eye  
In a moment death may come.*

*Life I count a thing unstable,  
Loss of friends inevitable  
Cherish all that are alive  
Sorrow not should you survive.*

Such amazing accounts of the Bodhisatta's self-control is awe-inspiring. It teaches us too to contemplate well and deeply on the teachings, to understand the truth of impermanence and to accept the fact of death. Perhaps then when we suffer the loss of loved ones, we too can reflect as the Bodhisatta did and maintain our composure.

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### *Death is no stranger to us*

Another way to contemplate on death so as to overcome fear of it, is to consider that it is no stranger to us. In this, our long wandering in *samsara*, the never-ending round of birth and death, the Buddha said we have died and been reborn innumerable times - so many are they that if we were to collect all our bones together and had the bones not rotted, each of the piles of our bones would rise up higher than the highest mountain! So too, the Buddha said, the tears we have shed in *samsara* over the

loss of our loved ones was more than the waters in the four oceans.

Truly, the Buddha said, we have suffered enough to be utterly wearied of life, and to seriously seek the way out of this maze of suffering, the way to the deathless Nibbana. But unfortunately, we have short memories and cannot remember any of our many past lives. How could we when we sometimes could not even remember what we did yesterday! And so we continue to live complacently, without the sense of urgency to cultivate the wisdom that can liberate us from all suffering. However, during the Buddha's time, there were many monks, including of course the Buddha, who could recollect their past lives. In our present age too, there have been accounts of people who had an uncanny ability to recollect their past lives. Francis Story and Dr Ian Stevenson had written books, documenting quite a number of these cases.

When we contemplate on rebirth we can benefit in two ways:

1. We can consider that death is, after all, no stranger to us. We have met it many times before. So we need not face it with fear. We can consider it as just another transition, a change from one life to another.
2. We can be motivated to find a way out of *samsara*, the round of birth and death. We may study more deeply the teachings of the Buddha. And we may strive harder to put them into practice, to develop *dana*, *sila* and *bhavana* - generosity, morality and meditation.

## *Momentary death*

In another way of looking at it, death is something we are experiencing from moment to moment. For in the absolute sense, we are dying every moment and being reborn the next. According to the Buddha, consciousness is arising and passing away all the time. On the dissolution of one consciousness, another immediately arises and this goes on and on, *ad infinitum*, until and unless we realize ultimate Nibbana. Bodily phenomena too are continuously arising and passing away. So what we have is just the continuous arising and dissolution of mental and physical phenomena. This is, in a way, a kind of death and rebirth which is occurring from moment to moment. In Pali, it is called *khanika-maranam* - momentary death. In the *Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, it is stated thus:

“In the absolute sense, beings have only a very short moment to live, life lasting as long as a single moment of consciousness lasts. Just as a cart-wheel, whether rolling or whether at a standstill, at all times only rests on a single point of its periphery: even so the life of a living being lasts only for the duration of a single moment of consciousness. As soon as that moment ceases, the being also ceases. For it is said: ‘The being of the past moment of consciousness has lived, but does not live now, nor will it live in future. The being of the future moment has not yet lived, nor does it live now, but it will live in the future. The being of the present moment has not lived, it does live just now, but it will not live in the future.’”

(Translated by Nyanatiloka in *Buddhist Dictionary*.)

In this context, a being is but a conventional term. In the ultimate analysis, it is just a series of consciousness arising and

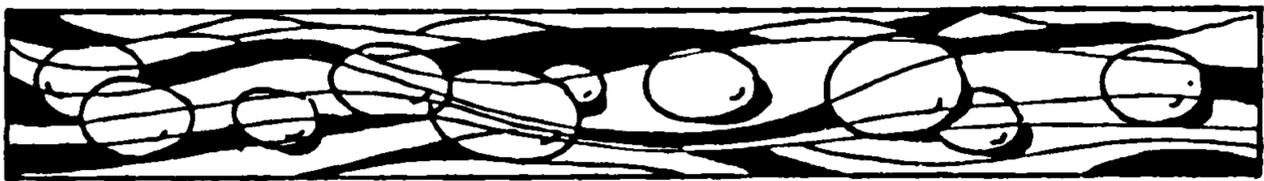
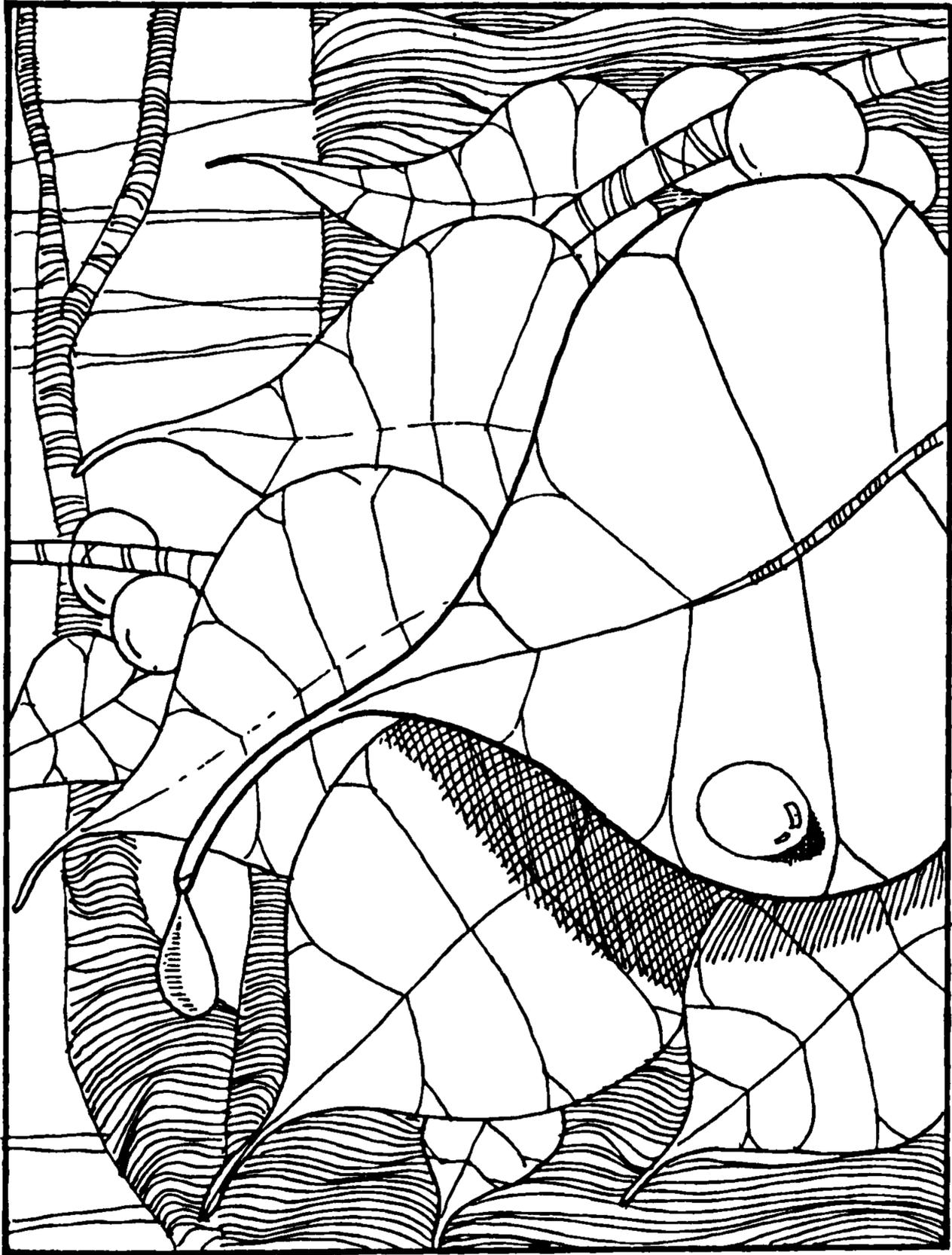
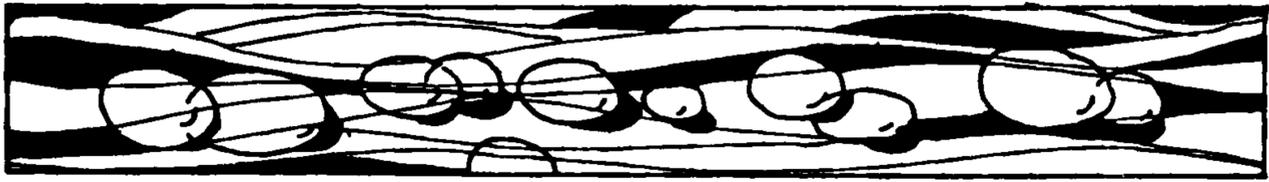
passing away. One consciousness dies, another arises - that's all. And we call this continuity or process a being. But in the ultimate sense, there is no being - no unchanging soul or mind, but just this series of consciousness arising and passing away, one consciousness conditioning the arising of another.

Furthermore, the conventional death that we experience at the end of one life-span is also not ultimate death. Another consciousness immediately arises but in a new body or realm according to the rebirth one has taken. Only when one has eliminated the mental taints of greed, hatred and delusion will no rebirth come about. Contemplating thus, we can also appreciate the nature of impermanence, suffering and no-self. And we can take life and death in our stride.

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### *Food for thought*

Everytime you look at the newspapers and come across obituaries or death announcements, do you give a thought to death? Do you pause and contemplate the fact of your own mortality? Whenever death comes to others, we don't feel much about it. The deceased may be a stranger to us. The suffering is not ours and, besides, we have become quite numbed to stories of death - they are reported everyday in the newspapers. Reading about how people are killed, especially in a war, life seems so cheap. There seems to be no respect for life. But when death strikes those close to us, how do we take it? And when we face our very own death, are we petrified with fear? Yes, although we know that death and tragedies are occurring all around us, yet we are thunderstruck



*Just like a dew drop that soon vanishes  
is the fleeting life of man.*

and are unable to accept it when it actually happens to us.

When we read the *in memoriams* in the newspapers, we can see that though a person may have passed away for some years already, yet the pain of separation suffered by the living ones is still very much there, as if it had been inflicted only yesterday. Sometimes in their messages, spouses or relatives openly expressed the sorrow they still felt and the tears they still shed for their loved ones. We understand it is very human to feel this way. But the Buddha also teaches us that, as human beings, we can imbibe ourselves with the wisdom and strength to accept our loss and to bear it stoically. It is not that the Buddha wants us to be unfeeling but that he wants us to have the wisdom to accept the loss and to understand the futility of our grief. Definitely he doesn't want us to pine away with grief, to grow thin and frail, to lose all interest in life. Buddhists in particular should understand this and thereby accept their loss stoically.

If Buddhists need to put a message to go with an obituary or in memoriam in the newspapers, why not Buddhist ones such as: *Impermanent are all conditioned things. Strive untiringly for the unconditioned Nibbana*; or meaningful contemplation on death such as: *Just as the dew-drop at the point of the grass-blade at sunrise very soon vanishes and does not remain for long: just so is the dew-drop-like life of men very short and fleeting. One should wisely understand this, do good deeds and lead a virtuous life; for no mortal ever escapes death.*

Or if one wishes to be more personal, how about a message that goes something like this: "My dear, if you could know, you will be pleased to know that the children are growing up beautifully. I have taught them the Dhamma well, to treasure the precious values of love and kindness, wisdom and understanding. I have taught them well not to ape the violence and greed that

often come across in mediums such as the TV and movies. As a consequence, they are very gentle and loving to everybody. As for me, I have been keeping my precepts and meditating. I am practising mindfulness in everyday life and I go for retreats once or twice a year. I am quite peaceful, and growing in the Dhamma. I try *not* to grieve for you; for you and I have understood somewhat the Buddha's teachings – that it is futile to grieve: it serves no purpose. And I know you wouldn't want me to grieve either, but to live a good and exemplary life.

“Nevertheless there were times, I must admit, when I felt the pain, when I missed you terribly, especially when I thought about the good times we had, the happiness we shared together, your sweet smile and bright eyes, the way you laughed and teased. Yes, when I got lost in such nostalgia, I must admit I do feel like bursting into tears. But dear, I can get a hold of myself. I can be mindful. I can watch the pain and accept it. I can watch my thoughts and mood. I can reflect on the Buddha's teachings and understand the futility of grieving. I can be happy and count my blessings – at least we have had happy times together and there are now the children to live for. I know my pain comes from my attachment and lack of deep understanding of the nature of all existence. Thank Buddha for teaching us mindfulness, for teaching us to live in the present, to be happy from moment to moment, to count our blessings, to bask in the happiness of a life well-lived.

“Well, I know this message is getting rather long. I realize too that you will not be around to read it. But it does make me feel good to express myself this way. I thank you for the happiness you have given me, and I dedicate all the good deeds that I have done, and the good life I now try to live, all that I dedicate to your sweet and loving memory. I wish that you too, in whatever good

rebirth you may have taken, may continue to practise the Dhamma until you attain Nibbana, the cessation of all suffering," and so on and so forth.

Admittedly this is a rather long message and I have got somewhat carried away. But what I would like to underscore here is the theme of the message, one of understanding and acceptance. It is just to give an idea of a Buddhistic message or expression. It can be shortened and put more simply. Or, except for its pedagogic (ie. its teaching) purpose, a message may not be needed at all. Such feelings are quite personal and can be kept private. When one has understood the Dhamma well, one can just carry on living a good life and be content.

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# A WORLD OF ANOMALIES

.....

*Reading* the newspapers and newsmagazines can give us much food for reflection. Besides the obituaries, there are grim reminders of suffering all over the world, though we may have become quite numbed to it. There are murders, robberies, rapes and wars, religious, ethnic, social and political conflicts, pollution, diseases, starvation, poverty, tortures, oppression, terrorisms, accidents, suicides and natural calamities such as earthquakes, fires, floods and hurricanes. It is a long and depressing list which can go on and on.

At the same time, side by side with these news stories there are pictures and advertisements showing happy people enjoying themselves, as if without a care in the world. They are laughing and posing behind posh cars, grand mansions, luxury hotel suites, bottles of alcohol, cigarettes, perfumes, cosmetics, glamorous designer outfits and exquisite jewellery. They are gorging themselves at food fests, beauty contests and fashion shows with beautiful and sophisticated looking models parading on the catwalk. The contrast is especially ironic when, say, you happen to see a high fashion parade next to a heart-rending picture story of piteous African children all skin and bones dying from sheer starvation.

We are said to be a civilised people who abhor violence and the inflicting of senseless pain on one another. Yet we have boxing championships at which two brawny men would, for a sum of money, try their utmost to bash out each other's brains to the roars of approval from the crowd, not unlike the barbarous days of the Romans when gladiators fought lions and each other for the entertainment of blood-thirsty spectators. We have matadors that would infuriate, torture and kill a bull just for the fun of it. And everybody, or at least the stadium-filled spectators, seems to think it is fun too.

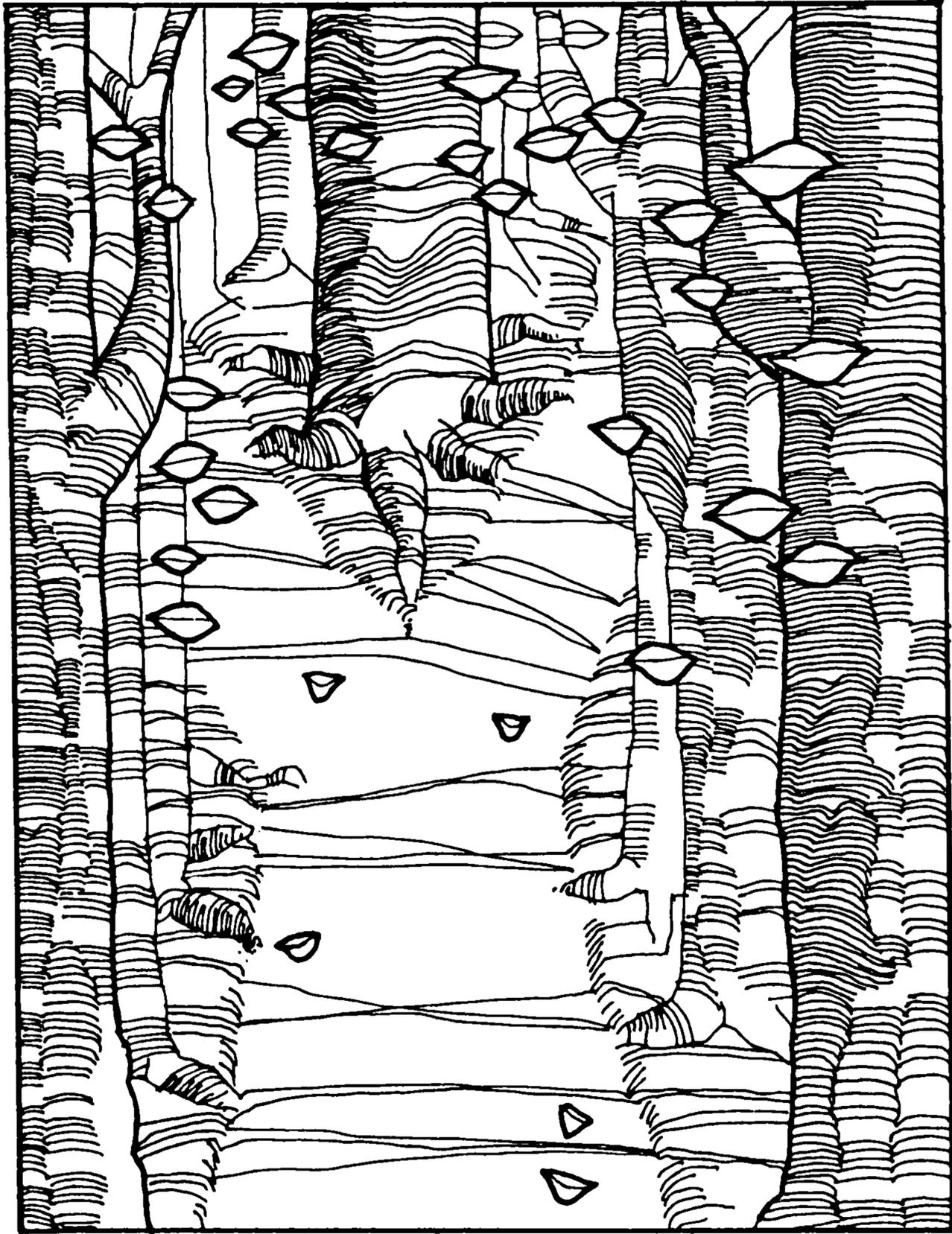
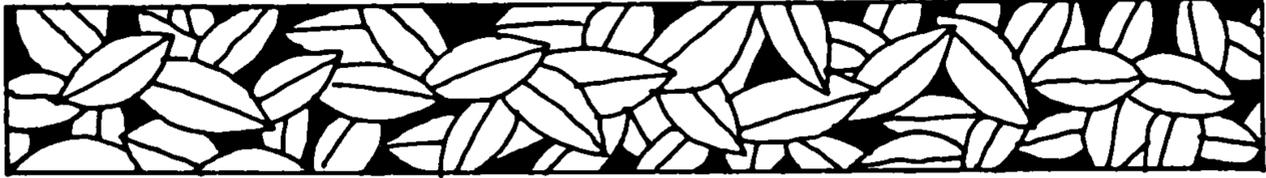
Smoking and drinking have taken great tolls on the health of the people, yet cigarettes and alcohol companies still insist on purveying in every possible way, even through the sports arena, their products of death. Smoking is ludicrously described as "an encounter with tenderness"! and drinking is equated with success and prestige among many other things. So-called developed countries are dumping their cigarettes and other harmful products on Third World nations while curbing the consumption of those products among their own people. In their inordinate greed for wealth, companies would go to great lengths, not seeming to have any qualms at all about what they say or do in the purveyance of their products. The mass media such as newspapers and newsmagazines, which accept and publish these advertisements because of greed for the huge sums of money they bring in, cannot absolve themselves too from responsibility. They have a basic human right to exercise a social conscience by declining harmful advertisements but they choose not to do so.

Looking at a glossy airline magazine, the picture of an elderly brewery company chairman in Thailand caught my attention. Dressed in suit and tie and with greying hair, he was proudly

displaying, in his posh conference room, a row of bottles of beer brewed by his factory. Just behind him was an altar on which sat a gleaming Buddha image. One can see that the altar was impressively and centrally located in the room. Now, the Buddha, as we all know, had taught abstinence, and the fifth precept to which all Buddhists subscribe, states: "I take the precept to abstain from alcohol and drugs which are a cause for heedlessness." It is hard, therefore, for an observer to reconcile the mass production and distribution of alcohol, which is considered a wrong kind of livelihood in Buddhism, with the image of a Buddha, displayed as it were, so proudly in the room.

Sulak Sivaraksa, a Thai social critic and activist, wrote in his book, *Seeds of Peace*, "It is a sorry fact that Siam has about 250,000 monks and more than twice that many prostitutes. This speaks for a system that is dysfunctional and has to be reexamined from the ground up. If we can return to the beautiful roots of our Asian traditions, we will help create a sane and functional model for living." In citing the latter two examples, it is not our intention to pick on Thailand, but just to point out anomalies. In point of fact, anomalies exist everywhere. Just as in Thailand, they can be equally found in Buddhist Burma, Buddhist Sri Lanka, our own or any other country. Nobody has a monopoly.

Yes, we can go on and on with the list of contradictions that abound in the world we live, but this much, we believe, would suffice to make our point. Yes, are we not a kind of society with a split or schizophrenic mentality? – like a Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. We know what is unwholesome, yet we condone and even encourage its proliferation. Apparently, we are all willy-nilly caught in it, and we are hurled along with the tide. Programmed and conditioned by the moguls of the advertising media, we



*When two roads diverge in your journey of life,  
which one will you choose?*

respond to their commands and messages. Buy this, buy that. Eat this, eat that. Wear this, wear that. Do this, don't do that. This is rugged and that is feminine. This is the *in-thing* and that is out. This is the great way to live; it is the jet-set high society, the world of great fun and entertainment.

Forgive me if I may sound like a critical person, a bad sport, or a mad monk standing on a soapbox declaring at the top of his voice that the end of the world is nigh and threatening a decadent society with hellfire and brimstones. But you might agree with me that it might not be a bad idea if, now and then, we were to step back a little and look at the state of the world and the state of our mind and the state of our life. Some wisdom may yet arise from such contemplation. We can re-assess our position and the direction we will like to go. Do we follow the crowd or do we break ranks? If I may "borrow" a verse from Robert Frost: *Two roads diverged in a wood and I – I took the one less travelled by. And that has made all the difference.* Yes, when two roads diverge in your journey of life, which one will you take? The one less travelled by – the path of mindfulness and wisdom, of love and compassion? Please do think about it, for it might well make all the difference.

o o o o o

*Where earth and water,  
fire and wind no footing find,  
There ebbs the flow,  
there whirls no more the round,  
there mind and matter  
cease without remainder.*

**Buddha**

# THE SWEETEST SMILE YET

.....

*As* we come to the end of our treatise on *Loving and Dying*, I should make it clear that I do not at all claim to be an authority on living, loving or dying. But I have tried to share some thoughts on the subject with you, thoughts about how to live and die with love and understanding all along the way. It is a subject which I have given, and shall continue to give, much thought to. It is a subject which, I believe, should be of interest to all of us – this question of life, love and death. Of course I am not claiming to be wise and I know I have many shortcomings too. Just like people who may mean well but still bungle along the way, I too am bungling and falling as I go along the way. But each time I do pick myself up, brush the dirt away, try not to lament or cry, set my sights once again on that mountain peak that rises up into the sky, and carry on with the journey of life.

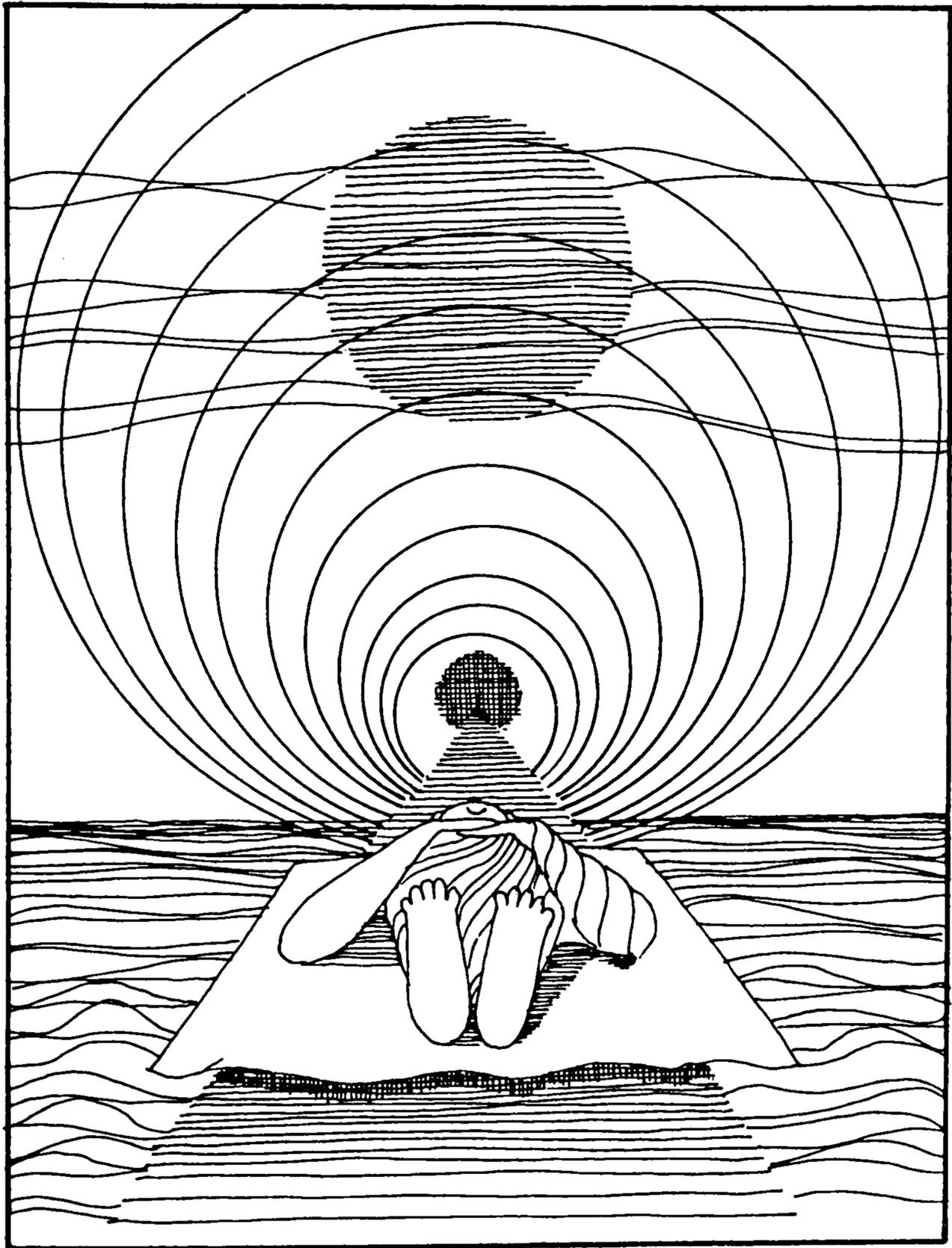
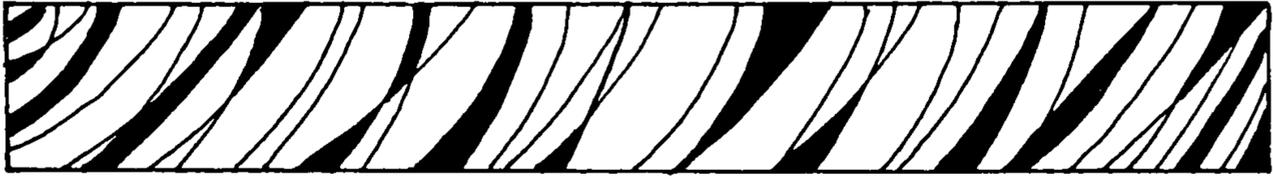
I do hope though that some of the thoughts I have shared here may have been of some help to you, that they may have lighted up a little of your way. If they should have given you a little inspiration and determination to live and die with more love and understanding, I would be very very happy. And if perchance

parts of my writing should have offended you in any way, I ask too for your forgiveness. As human beings we can only try – to serve and to share. We mean well, and what little we, despite our limitations, managed to contribute to a better society, it is a happy thing. Whenever I look back, it will give me some joy and solace to know that at least I have managed to do this much, even though it may only have been a little.

And when I die, perhaps I could say to Death: “O Death, you may do your worst now, for I have lived and loved, and I have done what little I could for my fellow-beings.” And before I slip quietly into the night, perhaps you might yet see that faintest trace of a smile on my lips.

*I will smile  
the sweetest smile yet  
you shall see  
And I will go  
very peacefully  
into the night.*

*Can you smile  
with me too?  
And say –  
Hello to death  
Goodbye to life.*



## HELLO DEATH, GOODBYE LIFE

When death comes, as it must, how would you face it? Could you smile, your sweetest smile yet, and say: “Hello Death, Goodbye Life”?

Yes, could you meet death without fear, but with courage and understanding? Could you greet it as you would a longlost friend, like someone who had not been calling upon you for a long time and who, you are now seeing, coming from afar? After all, death is no stranger to us; for we have lived and died innumerable times, encountering one rebirth after another in this, our long sojourn in samsara, the never-ending round of birth and death. Yes, death, we can say, is just another change in existence, just moving on yet again.

This book looks at life and death from a Buddhist context-how we can live well and die well, how we can beautify our lives with the beautiful values of love, wisdom and compassion, that must lead to a beautiful end, a beautiful death.

The writer, a Malaysian Buddhist monk, offers Buddhist approaches and attitudes, with common and universal values, to the perennial questions of life. He hopes the words within can give you some inspiration in living, loving and dying.

*“Wherever the Buddha’s teachings have  
flourished,  
either in cities or countrysides,  
people would gain inconceivable benefits.  
The land and people would be enveloped in peace.  
The sun and moon will shine clear and bright.  
Wind and rain would appear accordingly,  
and there will be no disasters.  
Nations would be prosperous  
and there would be no use for soldiers or weapons.  
People would abide by morality and accord with  
laws.  
They would be courteous and humble,  
and everyone would be content without injustices.  
There would be no thefts or violence.  
The strong would not dominate the weak  
and everyone would get their fair share.”*

**❧ THE BUDDHA SPEAKS OF  
THE INFINITE LIFE SUTRA OF  
ADORNMENT, PURITY, EQUALITY  
AND ENLIGHTENMENT OF  
THE MAHAYANA SCHOOL ❧**

# The Teachings Of Great Master Yin Guang



Whether one is a layperson or has left the home-life, one should respect elders and be harmonious to those surrounding him. One should endure what others cannot, and practice what others cannot achieve. One should take others' difficulties unto oneself and help them succeed in their undertakings. While sitting quietly, one should often reflect upon one's own faults, and when chatting with friends, one should not discuss the rights and wrongs of others. In every action one makes, whether dressing or eating, from dawn to dusk and dusk till dawn, one should not cease to recite the AMITABHA Buddha's name. Aside from Buddha recitation, whether reciting quietly or silently, one should not give rise to other improper thoughts. If wandering thoughts appear, one should immediately dismiss them. Constantly maintain a humble and repentful heart; even if one has upheld true cultivation, one should still feel one's practice is shallow and never boast. One should mind one's own business and not the business of others. Only look after the good examples of others instead of bad ones. One should see oneself as mundane and everyone else as Bodhisattvas. If one can cultivate according to these teachings, one is sure to reach the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.

**Homage to Amitabha! Amitabha!**

With bad advisors forever left behind,  
From paths of evil he departs for eternity,  
Soon to see the Buddha of Limitless Light  
And perfect Samantabhadra's Supreme Vows.

The supreme and endless blessings  
of Samantabhadra's deeds,  
I now universally transfer.  
May every living being, drowning and adrift,  
Soon return to the Pure Land of  
Limitless Light!

~The Vows of Samantabhadra~

I vow that when my life approaches its end,  
All obstructions will be swept away;  
I will see Amitabha Buddha,  
And be born in His Western Pure Land of  
Ultimate Bliss and Peace.

When reborn in the Western Pure Land,  
I will perfect and completely fulfill  
Without exception these Great Vows,  
To delight and benefit all beings.

~The Vows of Samantabhadra  
Avatamsaka Sutra~

# DEDICATION OF MERIT



May the merit and virtue  
accrued from this work  
adorn Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land,  
repay the four great kindnesses above,  
and relieve the suffering of  
those on the three paths below.

May those who see or hear of these efforts  
generate Bodhi-mind,  
spend their lives devoted to the Buddha Dharma,  
and finally be reborn together in  
the Land of Ultimate Bliss.  
Homage to Amita Buddha!

**NAMO AMITABHA**

南無阿彌陀佛

財團法人佛陀教育基金會 印贈

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we request that it be treated with respect.  
If you are finished with it,  
please pass it on to others or  
offer it to a monastery, school or public library.  
Thanks for your co-operation.  
**Namo Amitabha!**



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