

Old Age, Decay and Death: a Buddhist Perspective

Old age, decay and death are among the universal sufferings of samsara. Everybody that doesn't die young experiences a gradual decline ending in death. (No one gets off this planet alive.)

We are freshest and move the fastest at conception. Rapid cell division slows gradually and then there is the suffering of birth. Growth continues slowing until adulthood. At midlife, decay is nearly unnoticeable at first. With the onset of middle age, we do notice that we have passed our prime. The subtle signs of decay are easy to ignore, and we carry on in an illusion of permanence.

As the 50's pass into the 60's we begin to realize that we're on a downhill course as we begin to experience the early stages of old age. Vitality level, while lower than before, is still adequate, so we carry on and put the consciousness of inevitable death aside.

Many spiritual traditions, including Tibetan Buddhism, instead recommend keeping the fact of our incipient physical death thoroughly in mind. Among the 40 objects of meditation given traditionally are 10 about corpses in various states of decay. Contemplation of death is recommended in the various other traditions as well.

Given the momentary discontinuities in our experience, we can perceive little manifestations of death in the empty space before the next moment, before the next group of dharmas arises. It is during these empty moments that the Buddha Nature can be seen.

Similarly at death, the clear light is seen, during the empty space between death and the Chos-nyid Bardo. This is called the Clear Light Mind, the Chikai Bardo. As we continue our contemplation of death, I am reminded of the death of species- the death of entire species: Extinction 6. If we don't turn the climate crisis around soon, we may have caused our own extinction. How to feel about the probable death of the human species? Personally, I have mixed feelings. We are a rapacious and heedless people. Our great art and other

accomplishments, however, would also be wiped from the face of the earth. We are all gonna die, although when, where and how is uncertain. Nevertheless the probable death of our species is at a whole other level. In Indian cosmology, the death of a world system is called pralaya. In Buddhist cosmology, pralaya comprises the “water disaster”, “wind disaster” and the “fire disaster”.

In the Hindu tradition our era is called “Kali Yuga” The ‘Iron Age’, the age of the black goddess, consort of Shiva the destroyer of worlds. In Buddhism it is the age of the collapse of the Good Dharma, the Dharma Ending Age. Some of the mythology then has an immediate return to a Golden Age. In other versions, there is a gradual re-ascent: Ascending Kali to Dvapara the Bronze Age, to ascending Treta, the Silver Age, back to a Golden Age, which remains for a very long time, before beginning a new descent. Such a model indicates that we are not progressing but degenerating.

The sufferings of individual old age are many:

- Increasing frailty
- Decreasing range of social circulation
- There is a last time for everything
- Shrinking opportunity
- Loneliness and isolation
- Sense of abandonment
- Loss of friends and family to death
- Patronizing treatment by the young
- Fewer events in a day; things seem to speed up
- Susceptibility to disease
- Decreasing range of physical circulation. Less walking.
- Weakness of organ systems
- Psychological effects
- Loss of functionality (do it while you still can)

The fact of bodily slowing causes an illusion that time is speeding up. As the body and neural systems slow to a stop, there are fewer moments in a day and the days pass faster and faster. This accelerating impermanence is inexorable.

As physical death approaches, the outer dissolution begins. The sensorium is confounded. We are no longer able to process sense contacts. We can hear and see, but can no longer understand or recognize what is sensed.

The four elements begin to dissolve: As the earth element goes away, along with the form skandha, we can no longer stand, and there is the impression of a heavy weight pressing us down. We lack the energy to hold ourselves up. Even lifting the eyelids is a struggle. The sign of this is a ‘shimmering mirage’.

When the water element recedes, there is a loss of control of bodily fluids: the nose runs, eyes discharge, we become incontinent. Everything dries out and thirst is unquenchable. The feeling skandha dissolves, and one becomes frustrated and irritable. The sign of this phase is ‘haze with whirling wisps of smoke’.

The dissolution of the fire element is marked by the ebbing of all warmth from our bodies. Our breath is cold. We cannot digest anything. The perception skandha also dissolves. The mind swings between clarity and confusion. The sign of this is “shimmering red sparks dancing above an open fire, like fireflies.”

Then the air element begins to dissolve into space. Breathing becomes more and more difficult. We pant and labor to breathe. Outbreaths become longer. The samskara skandha dissolves. Our mind now becomes bewildered, unaware of the outside world. Everything becomes a blur with hallucinations and visions. The sign of this is “a flaming torch or lamp, with a red glow”.

Then breathing stops and we are clinically dead. The energy withdraws into the heart, which exhibits a slight warmth.

After clinical death, the inner dissolution proceeds: a kind of internal respiration continues. This lasts about 20 minutes after the breathing stops; “the length of time it takes to eat a whole meal”.

5th dissolution: the 80 conceptions-our gross and subtle thought states and emotions dissolve; the winds in the right and left channels above the heart level enter the central channel at the top of the head; the signs of this stage are a flickering butter lamp, and then clear vacuity filled with ‘white appearance’.

6th dissolution: mind of white appearance dissolves; the winds in the right and left channels below the heart level enter the central channel at the base of the spine. The sign is clear vacuity filled with red increase.

7th dissolution: mind of red increase dissolves; the upper and lower winds gather at the heart, and enter the drop (bindu) at the heart; the signs are vacuity filled with black darkness, swooning.

8th dissolution: mind of black near attainment dissolves; all winds dissolve into the very subtle life force in the indestructible drop at the heart: the mind of the clear light of death dawns.

This is the Chi Kai Bardo. Most people pass out and later awaken in a Bardo body. The Chos Nyid Bardo with its 100 peaceful and wrathful deities dawns. Then the Sid Pa Bardo appears and rebirth is usually sought. All this is said to take 49 days.

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