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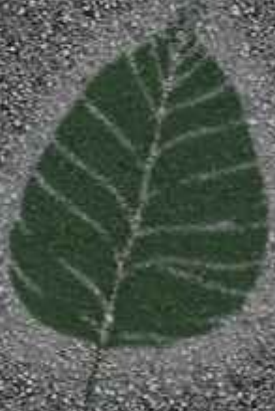
The Joy Hidden in Sorrow

Two Talks on Death and Dying

Ayyā Medhānandī



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By

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During these days of practice together, we've been reading the names of many people—our departed loved ones, and also relatives, family members, friends, who are suffering untold agony and hardship at this time. There is so much misery all around us. How do we accept it all? We've heard of suicides, cancer, aneurysms, motor-neurone disease plucking the life out of so many young and vibrant people. And old age, sickness, decay, and death snuffing the life out of many elderly people who still have a lot of living that they want to do. Why does this happen?

Death is all around us in nature. We're coming into the season now where everything is dying. This is the natural law, it's not something new. And yet time and again we keep pushing it out of our lives, trying our best to pretend that we're not going to die, that we won't grow old, that we'll be healthy, wealthy, and wise until the last moment.

We are constantly identified with our bodies. We think, "This is me," or, "I am my body, I am these

thoughts, I am these feelings, I am these desires, I am this wealth, these beautiful possessions that I have, this personality." That's where we go wrong. Through our ignorance, we go chasing after shadows, dwelling in delusion, unable to face the storms that life brings us. We're not able to stand like those oak trees along the boundary of the Amaravati meadow that stay all winter long and weather every storm that comes their way. In October, they drop their leaves, so gracefully. And in the spring, they bloom again. For us, too, there are comings and goings, the births and deaths, the seasons of our lives. When we are ready, and even if we aren't ready, we will die. Even if we never fall sick a day in our lives, we still die; that's what bodies are meant to do.

When we talk about dying before we die, that doesn't mean that we should try to commit suicide to avoid suffering. It means that we should use this practice, this way of contemplation, to understand our true nature. In meditation, we can go deeply into the mind, to investigate the true nature of mind and body, to understand impermanence, and to ask what is it that dies? Who dies?

Death can be peaceful. A peaceful death is a gift, a blessing to the world; there is simply the return of the elements to the elements. But if we have not come to realise our true nature, it can seem very frightening,

and we might resist a lot. But we can prepare ourselves, by investigating who it is that we really are; we can live consciously. Then when the time comes, we can die consciously, totally open, just like the leaves fluttering down, as leaves are meant to do.

Chasing shadows… What is it that we are really looking for in life? We're looking for happiness, for a safe refuge, for peace. But where are we looking for these things? We desperately try to protect ourselves by collecting more and more possessions, having to put bigger and bigger locks on our doors, to install alarm systems. We are constantly armouring ourselves against each other—increasing the sense of separation—by having more possessions, more control, feeling more self-importance with our college degrees, our PhDs.

We expect more respect, and we demand immediate solutions; it is a culture of instantaneous gratification. So we are constantly on the verge of being disappointed—if our computer seizes up, if we don't make that business deal, or if we don't get that promotion at work.

This is not to put down the material realm. We need material supports, food, clothing, medicines; we need a shelter and protection, a place to rest; we also need warmth, friendship. There's a lot that we need to make

this journey. But because of our attachment to things, and our efforts to fill and fulfil ourselves through them, we find a residue of hunger, of unsatisfactoriness, because we are looking in the wrong place. When somebody suddenly gets ill, loses a leg, has a stroke, is faced with death, gets AIDS and has to bear unspeakable suffering, what do we do? Where is our refuge?

When the Buddha was still Prince Siddhartha before his Enlightenment, he had everything. He had what most people in the world are running after, as they push death to the edge of their lives, as they push the knowledge of their own mortality to the farthest extreme of consciousness. He was a prince. He had a loving wife and a child. His father had tried desperately to protect him from the ills of life, providing him with all the pleasures of the senses, including a different palace for every season. But he couldn't hold his son back, and one day the prince rode out and saw what he had to see: the four heavenly messengers.

The first messenger he saw was an old man, weak and decrepit. Some of us might think it's contradictory that a heavenly messenger could come in the form of a very old person: "What's so heavenly about an old man struggling along the roadside?" But it is a divine messenger, because suffering is our teacher. It is

through our own experience and ability to contemplate suffering that we learn the First Noble Truth.

The second and third messengers were a sick person and a corpse riddled with maggots and flies, decaying on the funeral pyre. These were the things the Buddha saw that opened his eyes to the truth about life and death. But the fourth heavenly messenger was a *samaṇa*, a monk; a symbol of renunciation, someone who'd given up the world in order to discover the Truth within himself.

Many people want to climb Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world, but actually there is a Himalaya within each of us. I want to climb that Himalaya; to discover that Truth within myself, to reach the pinnacle of human understanding, to realise my own true nature. Everything on the material plane, especially what we seem to invest a lot of our energy hungering for, seems very small and unimportant in the face of this potential transformation of consciousness.

So that is where these four celestial signs were pointing the young Siddhartha. They set him on his journey. These are the messengers that can point us to the Way of Truth and away from the way of ignorance and selfishness, where we struggle, enmeshed in

wrong view, unable to face our darkness, our confusion, our pain. Stephen Levine refers to the distance from our pain, from our wound, from our fear, from our grief as being the distance from an understanding of our true nature.

Our minds create the abyss—that huge chasm. What will take us across that gap? How can we face the darkness that we feel? How do we develop the kind of discernment with which we can realise pure love in itself, that sublime peace which does not move towards nor reject anything? Can we hold every sorrow and pain of life in one compassionate embrace, coming deeply into our hearts with pure awareness, mindfulness and wise reflection, touching the centre of our being? As we begin to see more clearly, with penetrating insight, we learn the difference between pain and suffering.

What is the experience of grief? It is only natural that when someone we are close to dies, we grieve. We are attached to that person; we're attached to their company; we have memories of times spent together. We've depended on each other for many things—comfort, intimacy, support, friendship, so we feel loss.

When my mother was dying, her breath laboured and the bodily fluids already beginning to putrefy, she suddenly awoke from a deep coma, and her eyes met

mine with full recognition. From the depths of Alzheimer's disease that had prevented her from knowing me for the last ten years, she returned in that moment to be fully conscious, smiling with an unearthly, resplendent joy. A radiance fell upon both of us. And then in the next instant she was gone.

Where was the illness that had kidnapped her from us for so many years? In that moment, there was the realisation of the emptiness of form. She was not this body. There was no Alzheimer's and 'she' was not dying. There was just this impermanence to be known through the heart and the falling away, the dissolution of the elements returning to their source.

Through knowing the transcendent, knowing the reality of things as they are—knowing the body as body—we come to the realisation that we are ever-changing. We learn to rest in pure awareness and we touch that which is deathless.

In our relationships with each other, with our families, we can begin to use wisdom as our refuge. That doesn't mean that we don't love, that we don't grieve for our loved ones. It means that we're not dependent on our perceptions of our mother and father, children or close friends. We're not dependent on them being who we think they are, we no longer believe that our happiness depends on their love for

us, or their not leaving, not dying. We're able to surrender to the rhythm of life and death, to the natural law, the Dhamma of birth, ageing, sickness, and death.

When Marpa, the great Tibetan meditation master and teacher of Milarepa, lost his son he wept bitterly. One of his pupils came up to him and asked: "Master, why are you weeping? You teach us that death is an illusion." And Marpa said: "Death is an illusion. And the death of a child is an even greater illusion." But what Marpa was able to show his disciple was that, while he could understand the truth about the conditioned nature of everything and the emptiness of forms, he could still be a human being. He could feel what he was feeling; he could open to his grief. He could be completely present to feel that loss. And he could weep openly.

There is nothing incongruous about feeling our feelings, touching our pain, and, at the same time understanding the truth of the way things are. Pain is pain; grief is grief; loss is loss—we can accept those things. Suffering is what we add onto them when we push away, when we say, "No, I can't."

Today, while I was reading the names of my grandparents who were murdered, together with my aunts and uncles and their children, during World

War II—their naked bodies thrown into giant pits—these images suddenly overwhelmed me with a grief that I didn't know was there. I felt a choking pressure, unable to breathe. As the tears ran down my cheeks, I began to recollect, bringing awareness to the physical experience, and to breathe into this painful memory, allowing it to be. It's not a failure to feel these things. It's not a punishment. It is part of life; it's part of this human journey.

So the difference between pain and suffering is the difference between freedom and bondage. If we're able to be with our pain, then we can accept, investigate and heal. But if it's not okay to grieve, to be angry, or to feel frightened or lonely, then it's not okay to look at what we are feeling, and it's not okay to hold it in our hearts and to find our peace with it. When we can't feel what must be felt, when we resist or try to run from life, then we are enslaved. Where we cling is where we suffer, but when we simply feel the naked pain on its own, our suffering dies… That's the death we need to die.

Through ignorance, through our inability to see Dhamma, to understand things as they really are, we create so many prisons. We are unable to be awake, to feel true loving kindness for ourselves, or even to love the person sitting next to us. If we can't open our hearts to the deepest wounds, if we can't cross the

abyss the mind has created through its ignorance, selfishness, greed and hatred, then we are incapable of loving, of realising our true potential. We remain unable to finish the business of this life.

By taking responsibility for what we feel, taking responsibility for our actions and speech, we build the foundation of the path to freedom. We know the result that unwholesome action brings—for ourselves and for others. When we speak or act in an unkind way, when we are dishonest, deceitful, critical or resentful, then we are the ones that really suffer. Somewhere within us, there is a residue of that posture of the mind, that attitude of the heart.

In order to release it, to be released from it, we have to come very close. We have to open to every imperfection, to acknowledge and fully accept our humanity, our desires, our limitations, and forgive ourselves. We have to cultivate the intention not to harm anyone (including ourselves) by body, speech, or even thought. If we do harm again, we forgive ourselves, and start again from the beginning, with the right intention. We understand *kamma*; how important it is to live heedfully, to walk the path of compassion and wisdom from moment to moment—not just when we're on retreat.

Meditation is all the time. Meditation is coming into

union with our true nature. In transcending our conditioned nature, we move towards realisation of the Unconditioned. We gain the wisdom which enables us to accept all conditions, to be in total peace, complete union and harmony with all things the way they are. As long as we're holding one negative thing in our hearts— towards ourselves or anyone else—we cannot fully realise our true nature. We cannot be free.

How can we really take responsibility for our actions? By reflecting on our virtuous or wholesome actions, we are taking responsibility, and this is a support for the practice in the present moment. We feel the momentum of our mindfulness, confidence, trust, the energy of purity of mind, and that helps us to keep going.

Contemplating things that I don't feel good about can perhaps bring a dark cloud over consciousness. In fact this is very wholesome; it is the arising of moral shame and moral fear, *hiri-ottappa*. We know when we've done something that wasn't right, and we feel regret. But then we forgive ourselves, recollecting that we are human beings, we make mistakes. Through acknowledging our wrong action, our limitation, our weakness, we cross the abyss and free our hearts. Then we begin again.

This moral fear engenders a resolve in the mind

towards wholesomeness, towards harmony; there is the intention not to harm. This happens because we understand that greed conditions more greed, and hatred conditions more hatred, whereas loving kindness is the cause and condition for compassion and unity. Knowing this, we can live more skilful lives.

Once, it is said, when the Buddha was giving a teaching, he held up a flower. And the Venerable Mahākassapa, one of his great devotees and disciples, smiled. There's a mystery why the Venerable Mahākassapa smiled when the Buddha held up the flower.

What is it that we see in the flower? In the flower we see the ever-changing essence of conditioned forms. We see the nature of beauty and decay. We see the 'suchness' of the flower. And we see the emptiness of experience. All teachings are contained in that flower; the teachings on suffering and the path leading to the cessation of suffering—on suffering and non-suffering. And if we bring the teachings to life in each moment of awareness, it's as if the Buddha is holding up that flower for us.

Why are we so afraid of death? It is because we have not understood the law of nature; we have not understood our true nature in the scheme of things.

We have not understood that there's non-suffering. If there is birth, there is death. If there is the unborn, then there is that which is deathless: 'The Undying, Uncreated, Unconditioned, the Supreme, the Magnificent, Nibbāna'.

In pain we burn but, with mindfulness, we use that pain to burn through to the ending of pain. It's not something negative. It is sublime. It is complete freedom from every kind of suffering that arises; because of a realisation, because of wisdom, not because we have rid ourselves of unpleasant experience, only holding on to the pleasant, the joyful. We still feel pain, we still get sick and we die, but we are no longer afraid, we no longer get shaken.

When we are able to come face to face with our own direst fears and vulnerability, when we can step into the unknown with courage and openness, we touch near to the mysteries of this traverse through the human realm to an authentic self-fulfilment. We touch what we fear the most, we transform it, we see the emptiness of it. In that emptiness, all things can abide, all things come to fruition. In this very moment, we can free ourselves.

Nibbāna is not out there in the future; we have to let go of the future, let go of the past. This doesn't mean we forget our duties and commitments. We have our

jobs and the schedules we have to keep, we have our families to take care of; but in every single thing that we do, we pay close attention, we open. We allow life to come towards us, we don't push it away. We allow this moment to be all that we have, contemplating and understanding things the way they really are, not bound by our mental and emotional habits, by our desires.

The candle has a light. That light, one little candle from this shrine, can light so many other candles, without itself being diminished. In the same way, we are not diminished by tragedy, by our suffering. If we surrender, if we can be with it, transparent and unwavering, making peace with the fiercest emotion, the most unspeakable loss, with death, then we can free ourselves. And in that release, there is a radiance. We are like lights in the world, and our life becomes a blessing for everyone.

The poet Rumi wrote: "The most secure place to hide a treasure of gold is some desolate, unnoticed place. Why would anyone hide treasure in plain sight? And so it is said: 'Joy is hidden in sorrow.'"

The illumined master Marpa weeping over his child —does his experience of profound grief over the loss of his young child diminish his wisdom? Or is it just the supreme humility of a great man, a great sage

expressing the wholeness of his being, of his humanity —able both to fully feel the natural grief of a father losing his child within the deep understanding of the inevitable impermanence of all conditioned things.

I want to encourage each one of you to keep investigating, keep letting go of your fear. Remember that fear of death is the same as fear of life. What are we afraid of? When we deeply feel and, at the same time, truly know that experience we can come to joy. It is still possible to live fully as a human being, completely accepting our pain; we can grieve and yet still rejoice at the way things are.

The Way Beyond Fear

When we started out this voyage together, I invited you to join me on the journey of a mystic, to set foot in a boat unfamiliar to you, a vessel whose dimensions none of you knew, and to let it drift out to sea without really knowing where you were going; to face the unknown with an open heart, without any apparent support, with no promise of anything. Just the way

ahead, the way within, an internal voyager who leaves the pleasures of the world, and dives down deep into the recesses of his or her own heart-body-mind, alone.

As we embarked on that inner journey, we resolved to use right mindfulness as our compass, to bring careful attention, astute observation, and clear seeing to the witness of the present moment; and to be ready to meet any hindrance or obstacle that should arise in our path with that awakened awareness and pure presence. Such a practice asks of us a deep commitment, perseverance, and 'fanatical patience', to constantly come back, time and time again, to this moment.

We live in a society in which we're so used to being satisfied quickly, getting what we want, and being in control of things. But it just doesn't work in this practice. We have to have the faith, the willingness to surrender to the present moment, and in so doing to be annihilated, to be burned, to go into the fire of the mind without wanting it not to hurt and just to sit there. We enter into a spiritual holocaust.

I find that a very poignant expression because most of my relatives were killed during World War II. My father told me the story of how my grandfather was given the chance to save himself because he was a builder and his skills were needed. But, he chose to go

with his family. He went to his death holding his little granddaughter in his arms. I consider that act of courageous surrender for the love of one's family incredibly heroic.

Recently I read the diaries of Ettie Hillesum, a brilliant young Dutch woman who died in Auschwitz. She was only 29. While sharing her very intimate moments of prayer and struggle through a life torn apart in monstrous ways, she traces the journey of the mystic that each one of us has undertaken, the way beyond all mental and physical affliction into the realm of the timeless, the deathless:

"I have looked our destruction, our miserable end, straight in the eye and accepted it into my life. And I continue to grow from day to day, even with death staring me in the face. For my life has become extended by death…

"Living and dying, sorrow and joy, the blisters on my feet and the jasmine behind the house, the persecution, the unspeakable horrors—it is all as one in me, and I accept it all as one mighty whole."

Ettie exhorts us not to waste energy on fear of death, or the refusal to acknowledge its inevitability; to accept death into our lives not through resignation or bitterness but by "bowing to the inevitable," by looking death "straight in the eye… sustained by the

certain knowledge that ultimately they cannot rob us of anything that matters."

We must surrender all that is dearest to us in the enjoyment of the senses and go through a dark night in which we live without their help and comfort. Then when this is accomplished, we have to sacrifice even our thoughts and our choices, and undergo a still darker night—deprived of our familiar supports. This is a kind of death . . . and when all has been strained away, our emptiness will be filled with a new presence.

In this burning of the 'self' or the ego, we too are asked, with clear presence of mind, with courage and surrender, to give ourselves completely to the unknown. We know nothing about this unknown, this unpredictable moment except that meeting it with full awareness and acceptance is a wholesome thing to do. And as soon as we can step toward this moment, the only moment we have, with heroic surrender, we are tasting peace.

We are here to learn this same alchemy of the heart. We're not asked to do anything unwise or harmful, we're not asked to commit suicide or to annihilate ourselves, but just to learn to die to ourselves. It is not a physical death, but a spiritual dying that brings us fully to life now—each moment by courageous

moment.

For in dying to the present moment, we let go all expectation and hope, all fear and desire, all sense of self and personal history— this kind of death is a true self-emptying; and it is, in fact, our redemption.

Coming here was an act of courage, to contemplate death and make dedications to our parents, children, and friends who have died in tragic or distressing ways; or to those who live in pain with AIDS, cancer, Alzheimer's, paralysis, mental illness, or abuse. In the face of such affliction in our own lives, or in the lives of our family members and friends, it is natural for us to feel devastating grief, bereavement, a darkness in the heart that is anything but peaceful.

So in the face of such devastating loss and pain, is it possible to know peace? Can we enter the fire of our suffering, and allow it to burn inside of us without our being burnt?

Ettie had endured physical and mental abuse of the worst kind. But she did not allow herself to indulge in hatred or resentment towards her abusers, nor did she did lose her dignity as a human being even when there was nothing in her world to hope for beyond her suffering. All she could do was take refuge in herself.

This way of responding to life and death resonates with the teachings of the Buddha. In the suttas, we

read the Buddha's instructions to his disciples in times of calamity or distress, and the ways they used the Dhamma to transform their suffering, through insight knowledge and understanding.

We see an example of this in Venerable Ānanda. He was an experienced bhikkhu who had long been devoted to the Triple Gem. He served as the Buddha's personal attendant and was often called upon to give discourses on the teachings. But after the Venerable Sāriputta passed away, Ānanda lamented his death so deeply that he felt "almost as if he had fallen into an abyss." And while he was in this state, he could not even find the strength in Dhamma to bear his overwhelming feeling of loss. It was only when the Blessed One consoled him and asked him if Sāriputta's death could take away Ānanda's virtue, concentration, wisdom, liberation, or knowledge of liberation that Ānanda's grief was assuaged.

Like Ānanda, we must realise that our own suffering, the loss of our loved ones, even facing our own extinction, does not diminish the noble qualities in us. We must bring forth the reflection on the inevitability of death: "All that is beloved and pleasing to me will become otherwise, will become separated from me." We must seek refuge in ourselves, in no one else, to be our own "island and refuge."

The story of Kisāgotami brings this teaching beautifully to life. She had married into a wealthy family, in spite of her poverty and unattractive appearance, and finally won the acceptance of her in-laws when she bore a little son. Suddenly, the child died. Nothing could be more tragic for Kisāgotami. She refused to accept that her little son was dead. In her desperation, she came to see the Buddha, cradling the infant in her arms, believing that the Blessed One could revive him.

The Buddha asked her to procure a few mustard seeds from a house where no one had ever died. When she could find no household that had been spared death's unremitting hand, the insight into the impermanence of all conditioned phenomena arose in her mind. And so, Kisāgotami was able to go beyond 'the death of sons', beyond sorrow.

One of the most heart-rending accounts of how personal tragedy can lead to insight into impermanence and spiritual awakening concerns the beautiful young Paṭācārā, who also lived at the time of the Buddha. Born to a wealthy merchant family of Sāvatthī she eloped at a young age with her lover to avoid a marriage arranged by her over-protective parents. Fearing the wrath of her father, the young couple settled in a remote area.

On two different occasions Paṭācārā became pregnant, and both times, in spite of her husband's unwillingness to accompany her, the headstrong young woman secretly set off on her own for Sāvatthī hoping that the birth of her child would soften her parents' hearts and bring about a reconciliation. Each time, her husband pursued her and found her. On the first occasion, the child's birth en route precipitated their return before reaching Sāvatthī. But the second journey led to a series of calamitous events. First, Paṭācārā had to endure the hardship of bearing her child in a raging storm, without shelter or support. The next morning she discovered her husband's body; he had died from snake-bite while looking for materials to build a shelter to protect them from the storm. Then, as she struggled on alone in the direction of Sāvatthī her new born infant was snatched up in the talons of a hawk and carried away, and within moments, her first-born son drowned in the swollen currents of a river they were trying to cross. And finally, when she reached Sāvatthī exhausted and stricken with grief, Paṭācārā learned that her parents and brother had just perished in a fire that destroyed the family home.

By the time Paṭācārā appeared before the Blessed One, she was nearly mad with grief and despair. Recognising her readiness to hear the Dhamma, and

out of compassion for her, the Buddha taught her about the dangers of *saṃsāra*:

"Do not be troubled any more. You have come to one who is able to be your shelter and refuge. It is not only today that you have met with calamity and disaster, but throughout this beginning-less round of existence, weeping over the loss of sons and others dear to you, you have shed more tears than the waters of the four oceans.

> The four oceans contain but a little water
> Compared to all the tears we have shed,
> Smitten by sorrow, bewildered by pain.
> Why, O woman are you still heedless?" [1]

She soon realised with penetrating insight the nature of all conditioned things, that they arise, they cease, and in their cessation there is peace.

After her acceptance into the Bhikkhunī Sangha, Paṭācārā attained deepening realisations, which she expressed through her poetry. She vividly compares the streams of water flowing down a slope to the different life-spans of human beings. Some streams drain into the sand very soon on the descent, others more slowly, while some reach the bottom of the slope and then sink into the earth. And so with beings of this realm: some live only a few years, some reach

mid-life, and others even reach old age, but each one eventually succumbs to death (Therīgāthā 112–16).

The final moment of her awakening is portrayed in a memorable poem:

"Then I took a lamp and went into my cell, checked the bed, and sat down on it. I took a needle and pushed the wick down. When the lamp went out, my mind was freed."

From this seeing into the true essence of all conditioned phenomena, we realise three universal qualities: in the arising of all conditions, we see *anicca*, impermanence, that which has the sign of death, and which ultimately points us toward the signless or deathless. These temporal conditions also dissolve and pass away; thus we know *dukkha*, the suffering of being propelled by desire, the unsatisfactoriness of the conditioned realm, and we are brought to the knowledge of the timeless, the desireless. Finally, in the cessation of these transient conditions there is peace, emptiness, no self to be found, *anattā*.

We are also urged to contemplate our *kamma* and the relentless wheel of *saṃsāra*. At one time the Blessed One asks a man lamenting his father's death: "For which father are you grieving, the father of this life, or the last life, or the life before that. For if one wanted to grieve, then it would be just as well to

grieve for the other fathers too" (Jātaka 352).

As you contemplate these teachings, ask yourselves: "Who is it that dies? Who is abused? Who grieves? What are we identified with—the body, feelings, perceptions, mental fabrications, thoughts, and memories? Where is our true refuge? Is there shelter in that which is impermanent?" As soon as we identify with and become attached to desire, to the conditioned, then we are seeking refuge in things that die, not in the Deathless.

There are two kinds of death for the living, one that leads to death and one that leads to peace, to enlightenment. When we carry around a lot of wreckage in the mind, we are not putting down the burden. We are identifying with and caught in self-view, "I am an abused person" or "a grief-stricken person," or "Five of my friends have died from AIDS and I just can't face life." That's a death that leads to death.

But if we can meet the present moment with mindfulness and wise reflection, we can begin to put down that burden, surrender it, and allow ourselves to receive the next moment with purity of mind, letting the conditions that arise and our attachment to them die. That kind of death leads to enlightenment.

If we are not aware, we are as if dead, and we live in

fear of death. As Socrates said, “Those who love wisdom practise dying all the time and death to them is the least terrible thing in the world.” The fearless mind is the mind of the mystic voyager, the mind that sees life the way it really is, holding each moment in its gaze, witnessing this arising and ceasing of tempest, of agony, of fear, of the darkest night, and turning each one to the light to be redefined and revealed to us, and then to end, to cease.

This practice is not to condone our suffering, but to question our assumptions, to allow moral indignation when there are wrongs, to accept our humanity. So we feel the pain of illness, the burden of stigma, the loss of the loved, the fear of death, and yet we fully receive life with merciful awareness. No matter how much suffering life brings us, we can always return to that still point of knowing, to a serene abiding in the centre of life’s storms, a safe harbour.

And like Paṭācārā, Kisāgotami or Ettie, in dying to our pain, to our grief, to our hatred, to our fear—letting them go at their own rhythm, not forcibly, not trying to control or get rid of them, we begin to see them as natural conditions arising due to causes. We know their nature, their origin, their ending, and the way to their dissolution. Rather than something dark and fearful, death becomes a resurrection, an inner illumination, like “the sun awakening the lotus.”

By coming here, you may have expected that you would figure out how to get rid of the terrible grief or fear that you're feeling, or how to overcome death. Actually, it's not about getting rid of anything. We enter the eternal just by dropping our illusions and our assumptions, offering ourselves to the moment, and standing at the brink of the world with the courage not to cling to anything or anyone.

What would it be like if we never got old? What if we never got sick, or if we never died? Could we really love each other if we were here forever? Through our own mortality we learn to love; through our darkest suffering, we are taken beyond suffering; by being exposed to our own extinction, we can realise that within us which is indestructible. Trusting each moment, even in the midst of the most terrifying conditions, we awaken in ourselves the possibility to live with complete trust. We grow more vulnerable and, at the same time, more fearless, not taking refuge in sorrow. We learn how to live, and how to die, and how to embrace our joy and our pain.

We heard of the atrocities happening in Kosova with so many innocent people being mutilated to death. It seems to go on in every generation, every century. Purity and wholesomeness are so badly needed in this world.

Be earth, air, fire, water, the elements. Be that mystic traveller diving for the pearls of wisdom in your heart. Then your actions can spring from an awakened awareness, each moment of pure-seeing conditioning the next. This purity of view is able to contemplate defilement in the mind, to know sorrow as that which takes us to suffering; to understand that which is noble in the mind and to be totally committed to it.

This then is our pilgrimage. Not just during the retreat, but even when you leave this sanctuary and go back to your daily lives, sustain that ardour and that total commitment to free yourselves, and to bless the world.

As Ettie wrote: "You must be able to bear your sorrow, even if it seems to crush you. You will be able to stand up again, for human beings are so strong, and your sorrow must become an integral part of yourself. You mustn't run away from it. Do not relieve your feeling through hatred. Give your sorrow all the space and shelter in yourself that is its due, for if everyone bears grief honestly and courageously, the sorrow that now fills the world will abate."

Notes

1. Dhammapada Commentary 2:268; Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends*, 2:255 **[Back]**

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