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EUROPEAN BUDDHIST

magazine

**Death and
Dying from
a Buddhist
perspective**

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Editorial

"I am not afraid of Death. I just don't want to be there when it happens." (Woody Allen)

Dear readers, dear friends,

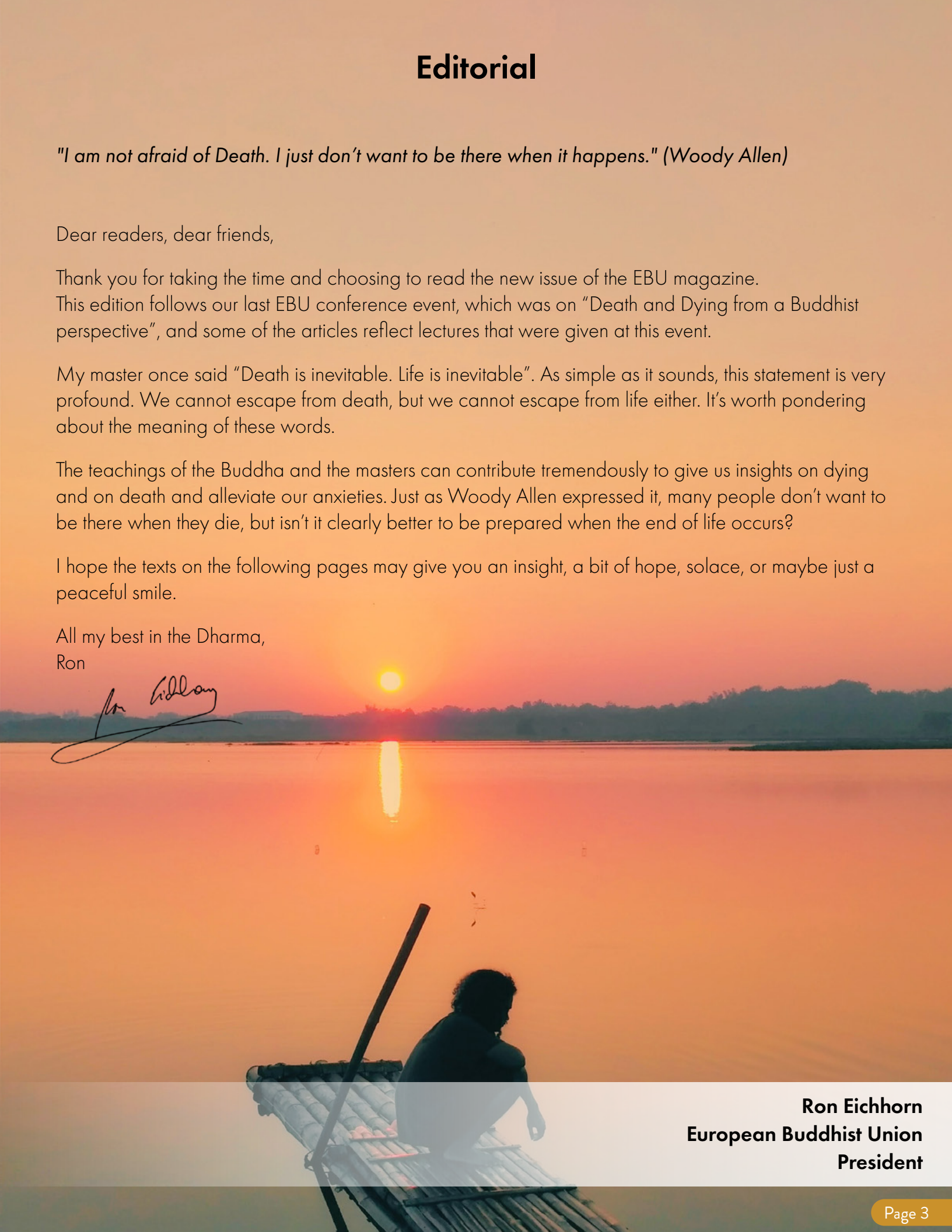
Thank you for taking the time and choosing to read the new issue of the EBU magazine. This edition follows our last EBU conference event, which was on "Death and Dying from a Buddhist perspective", and some of the articles reflect lectures that were given at this event.

My master once said "Death is inevitable. Life is inevitable". As simple as it sounds, this statement is very profound. We cannot escape from death, but we cannot escape from life either. It's worth pondering about the meaning of these words.

The teachings of the Buddha and the masters can contribute tremendously to give us insights on dying and on death and alleviate our anxieties. Just as Woody Allen expressed it, many people don't want to be there when they die, but isn't it clearly better to be prepared when the end of life occurs?

I hope the texts on the following pages may give you an insight, a bit of hope, solace, or maybe just a peaceful smile.

All my best in the Dharma,
Ron



Ron Eichhorn
European Buddhist Union
President

SURRENDERING TO THE MYSTERY

The Stoic philosophers taught that the secret of wisdom lay in learning to live and die as brave men, as captains of a sailing ship and with dignity. Epicurus maintained, with a felicitous intuition, that there is no reason to be afraid of death because when we are there it is not there and when it is present we have already disappeared. Throughout history and in the various cultures, man has sought a thousand strategies and invented an infinite number of narratives, including the buddhist one, to overcome the fear of death and instead recount life, removing it from the power of time and space. The behavioural codes of a community are the way in which we find our sense in the face of the mystery of death, the clarity that reassures us, makes us feel we have a place to inhabit and in which to measure our experience. As imperfect and impermanent as it is, as personal and limited as it is, this narrative identity of ours is expressed through ritual, through symbols, language and images that we recognise as familiar: this is the door that allows us to enter into a relationship with the mystery and the absolute and to enter into the world, to be part of the world. These elements are so ancestral precisely because they are unique expressions of our humanity and at the same time represent a world and the reflections of every world. There is nothing more effective than stories to enable us to understand the value that rituals and symbolism have in the processes of building a community and its healing process. The immediate identification in words and gestures represents common ground,

the foundations on which the spirit of a community rests.

This is why, in the face of the great mystery of living and dying, one cannot but speak of a contemplative investigation, because it is only through this way that one can "see", listen to, perceive, the presence of a connection with the absolute, of a transcendent presence that neither thought nor language are adequate to express. The reason for the Buddha's silence in the face of the great existential questions lies precisely in the awareness of this impossibility and in the need to take a step backwards precisely because the mind, as we understand it, is an excellent instrument that is adequate to provide us with the signposts for the journey into the conventional world. But it is totally unprepared for the challenge of surrendering to what it does not understand and simply saying 'yes' to the imponderability of human experience. When, for example, in Zen we ask "what is this?", we are referring exactly to the relationship with this mysterious, non-rational dimension, which is an impassable terrain for thought, which in fact breaks down in the face of this question and is bent on answering, with great honesty: "I haven't the faintest idea". When we drop the conventional way of looking at events and access a wider dimension, a more integrated, global perception of our being inside the process of existence. And it is precisely this being part, seamlessly, with the flow of existence and its dimension of vacuity that allows us to gradually enter into relationship with that inevitable process of change that will lead us to die and to understand that life is not a mystery but the mystery itself is life and that the only possibility we have is to surrender.

Stefano Davide Bettera
European Buddhist Union
Vice President

I grew up next to a wild river with murky black swirls. As a child those swirls in the water were tempting but scary as they felt like black holes. Treacherous and unknown. As we were putting together this autumn issue of EBU Magazine I was living in the beautiful mountainy Alps and every morning I went for swim in the wild and crystal clear river next to our cabin. One day I stayed a bit longer just to be one with nature and sit with the world. All of a sudden I saw those swirls in a new way and even with the wild swirls I could see the bottom of the river with beautiful pebbles that the lively river had stroke.

As I was reading the touching articles from our writers, masters and teachers in this Autumn issue these swirls reminded me of how I have seen death in life. Unknown and dark. I doubt I'm not alone with this thought. In our Western culture that is how we are learned to see death. I hope You were lucky enough to join our conference in April with the topic of Death and Dying from the Buddhist perspective. In this issue we have chosen to come back to this so present topic. I warmly welcome You dear reader to connect and see death and dying with beginners mind.

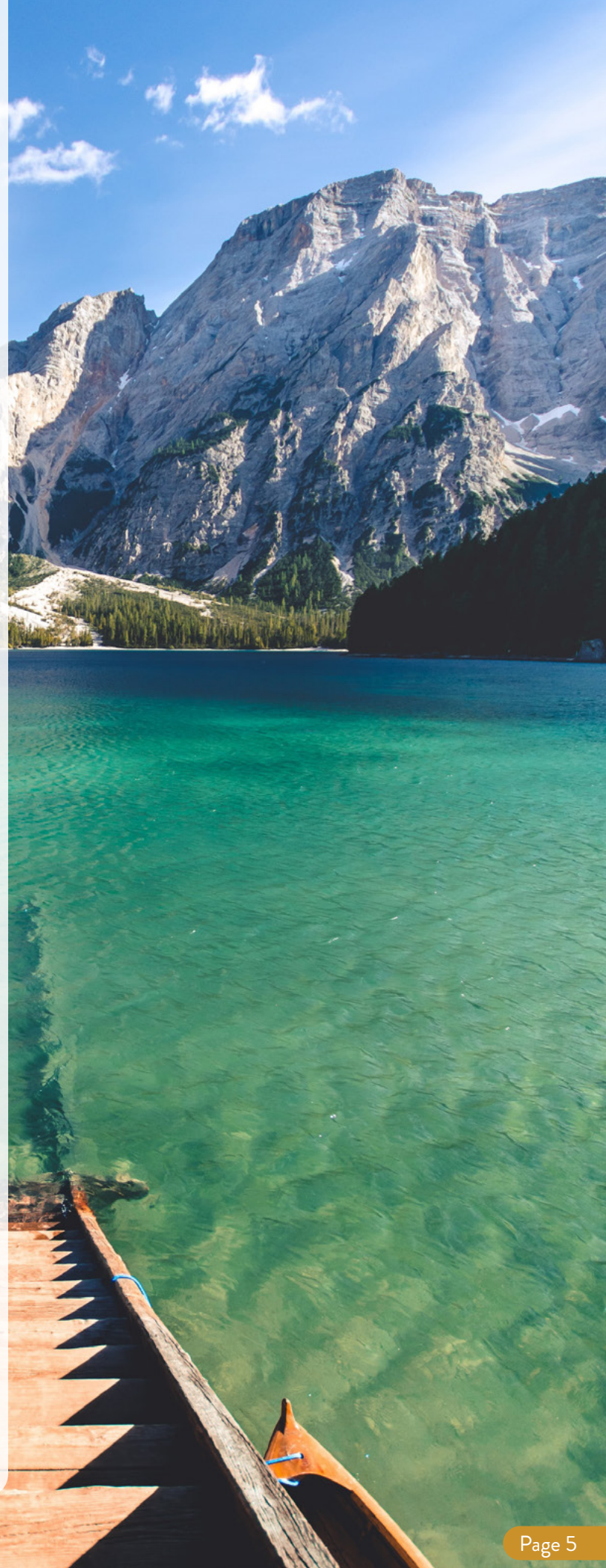
I hope You will find comfort and wisdom from these touching articles in these challenging times. May all sentient beings be free from suffering and at peace.

On a branch
Floating down river
a cricket, singing.

KOBAYASHI ISSA

With metta

Emilia Amalā Raunio
European Buddhist Union
Editor in chief and Council member



Introducing our writers



Kirsten DeLeo is a meditation teacher, author and longtime Tibetan Buddhist practitioner. Kirsten helped to pioneer Authentic Presence, a training programme in contemplative end-of-life care. She currently supports the Spiritual Care Centres in Germany (Sukhavati) and Ireland (Dzogchen Beara). Her book "Present Through The End. A Caring Companion's Guide For Accompanying The Dying" is available in English and German. kirstendeleo.com



Ven. Lama Ngawang Dorje Dondrub. Sakya Buddhist teacher for more than 15 years, expert in the application of Buddhist philosophy in personal development, both in individuals and in organisations and companies. Through his monastic life he has developed a special skill in unravelling the dharma to positivise the individual in the face of everyday difficulties and to transform ordinary conflicts into wonderful challenges. "If you grow you help and if you help you grow".



Dario Doshin Girolami. M.Phil., is a Soto-Zen priest and a Dharma Teacher in the lineage of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi. Former Adjunct Professor of Zen at John Cabot University and of Comparative Religion at the American University of Rome, he currently teaches Buddhism and holds regular seminars at the Faculty of Psychology at Sapienza University of Rome, and teaches Meditation at Rebibbia Prison - Rome. *Photo: Marco Girolami.*



Bodhi Lama Rita grew up in Austria, and studied Languages and Cultures of Southasia and Tibet at the University of Vienna. She met her root Guru His Eminence Dzogchen Khenpo Choga Rinpoche, the 32. lineage holder of the Dzogchen tradition in 1994. From 2009 to 2020 she spent more than five years in retreats and internships to be trained as a Lama and practitioner. She has dedicated the past 11 years to the promulgation and perpetuation of the Dzogchen Buddha Path tradition and was enthroned as a Bodhi Lama in 2018.



Arja Sihvola is a journalist and author. She has been a member of The Bodhidharma Association since 2007 and has been a Dharma Teacher since 2014. For more than 10 years she volunteered at the Surunauha (Mourning Ribbon) Association which supports people who have lost loved ones through suicide.



Gernot Landschein: Gernot Landschein became a student of the Vidyadhara Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in 1978. After the Vidyadhara's death he became student of his son Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche. He is Dharma teacher and meditation instructor in his local center in Marburg and has helped establishing Dharma centers of his practice lineage all over Europe. Gernot has been active as physician since 1980 and is specialized in acupuncture, naturopathy and holistic family medicine. Also, he holds a degree in Tibetan medicine. He is happy to enjoy his three grown-up children.



Frédéric la Combe (Lama Lhundroup): Dharma instructor and mindfulness facilitator, translator, graduate of a master's degree in Chinese, after having lived several years in China, he made a three-year retreat in the Tibetan tradition under the guidance of Denys Rinpoche. He has been working in the service of the Buddha's teachings and the Buddha University for the past twenty years. Organizer of numerous inter-tradition meetings in a humanist vision of unity in diversity, he is interested in the meeting of the Buddha's wisdom with our life today, particularly in the fields of deep ecology and others. Contact : Hameau de Saint Hugon, 73110 France, lhundroup@rimay.net



Philippe Judenne: Philippe Judenne is editor-in-chief of the magazine Sagesses Bouddhistes published by the French Buddhist Federation. Trained as an engineer and father of three, he has been managing media projects for over 10 years. He has been practising Vajrayana in the Karma Kagyu tradition for about twenty years.



Emilia Amalā Raunio is a yoga teacher and free writer. As Buddhist practitioner and background in food science her interest is to heal the world together with our everyday actions. She is a member and dharma teacher student at Bodhidharma association, vice president of Finnish Buddhist Union and council member of EBU. Emilia is also one of the hosts in EBU's European Buddha Podcast.



Stefano Davide Bettera is a writer and journalist. He published "La via occidentale alla meditazione" (Corriere della Sera - 2020), "Il Buddha era una persona concreta" (Rizzoli - 2019), "Karma Polis" (Franco Angeli - 2018), "Fai la cosa giusta" (Morellini - 2018), "Felice come un Buddha" (Morellini - 2017). He has been conducting research and study activities for years on the relationship between spirituality, philosophy and contemporary and ancient cultures. He is Vice President of the European Buddhist Union and on the board of the Italian Buddhist Union.



Ron Eichhorn is the president of the European Buddhist Union and a head disciple of the Supreme Matriarch Ji Kwang Dae Poep Sa Nim. He is abbot of the Berlin temple of the Yun Hwa Sangha and a professional film director. In his spare time, he likes to go sailing and plays the Ukulele.

BEING PRESENT THROUGH THE END



By Kirsten DeLeo

Impermanence, compassion, buddha nature.
Walking alongside a dying person
these teachings become real and practical.
It is a tremendous catalyst to grow up
spiritually and as a human being.

Charles, an African American in his seventies, was one of my first hospice patients. It was the end of a summer day, and I still remember how the dark red shadows from the setting sun enveloped his room and touched his frail body. His eyes were closed and he spoke softly in between long pauses to catch his breath. I sat with him and listened. I don't know this old man, I thought. I had only seen him a few times. We were just two strangers, sitting together. Looking at this frail body, I felt sad and tender. As I tried to let go of his hand gently and lean back on my chair into the shadows of the room to hide my face and feelings, he suddenly shifted his head toward me and opened his eyes. It felt like I had just walked into a fire. Don't run. Just don't run. Stay, an inner voice said. Without a word, he pulled my hand onto his chest and rested it there. I

could feel the bones underneath his skin, his heartbeat. This is what it means to be present, I realized in that moment. Not to run, but to stay, even in the fiercest fire. I moved back out of the shadows so he could see my face. My heart burned, but at its very centre was a place of unexpected calmness. "I am sad. I am here," I said to him. He gently squeezed my hand. "Good," he said. "Good." With his small gesture of resting my hand on his chest and his kind, simple reassurance—through his presence—Charles taught me that it is okay to be vulnerable and be present.



Sitting in the presence of a dying person, we sit in the nakedness of the present moment. We sit with sadness or fear. We search for the right words to say, the right thing to do to make the situation better. Yet, there is no right word that will magically make things better. No trick that will make feelings of sadness, discomfort or fear disappear. What I learned is that it is about being present.

Being present even though you may feel powerless, to stay when you want to run, to love while loss is just around the corner, and to be fully awake to every moment as time is running out.

Accompanying a dying person, you do not have to be an expert. You do not have to be perfect. You are all that is needed. Your good heart and kind presence.

The thinking mind, however, makes things complicated. It feeds the belief that our presence and who we are is fundamentally lacking something. The nagging voice in our head keeps telling us that we are not enough and not good enough.

And there are the millions of self-help books, weekend workshops, apps and lifestyle gurus that tell us we have to improve ourselves.

John, a close friend who died of AIDS, helped me understand the simple gift of human kindness. As his condition worsened and it became clear that he would not make it through his latest health crisis, he decided to leave the hospital to die at home, supported by his sangha. When I came over to visit him the first afternoon he was home, I asked him what I could do to help. "Just be my friend," he said, with some sadness.

JUST BE MY FRIEND.

The simplicity of his statement touched me. His words brought home what caring is all about. Just like being a good friend, it simply means we are willing to listen and be present to the unique experiences of a fellow human being, and how that person chooses to fill these experiences with meaning.

In the practice of meditation, we connect with our good heart and the inherent capacity for presence. We become mindful of thoughts and feelings. We slow down, become more spacious and kind. We experience the expansiveness of our awareness and learn to trust and rest in it. All this will support us to be there for a loved one or patient who feels vulnerable, and who is dying. It will also help us to prepare for our dying. In this way, our meditation practice is never separate from life including dying.

Through meditation, we can become better listeners because it teaches us to be more comfortable in our skin and with silence. Listen deeply and explore with the person what matters to them now. Be curious. If the person does not want to talk about death, talk about life. What has given and still gives her joy and meaning, where does she draw strength from now, or is there anything she still wants to accomplish? If the person does not want to talk, it is okay to sit quietly.

A young man with terminal cancer told me that with the labels "incurable" and "terminal" everyone started to behave and speak differently. "They tiptoe around me now, speaking over me rather than with me in hushed voices and serious demeanour," he said. "But I am still here."

DYING PEOPLE ARE STILL PEOPLE.

If you are at a loss at how to connect, try seeing the person as another human being. Just like you, the person sitting next to you, on the screen or the phone has hopes and dreams. She has fears and hidden anxieties, just like you. She wants to be valued and belong, just like you. If possible, gently hold her hand and let her know, "I don't know what to say. I am here with you."

To sit with a dying person, we sit with our own dying. It is an invitation to lean into death and allow death to become present in our own life. Am I ready? What is my refuge? What can I rely on? Interestingly, there is no word in the Tibetan language for Buddhist. The word used is 'nangpa' meaning someone who looks within. Quietly and astonishingly, the pandemic has challenged us to become 'nangpas', to turn our minds within and reflect on how our lives and our dying.

Accompanying a dying person is extraordinary and ordinary, spiritual and deeply human. You bear witness to a great mystery, and then there is the laundry, the phone calls, long waits in the doctor's office, and the shopping list.



The extraordinary, the sacred, shines through in the ordinary. It shines through in the unexpected, unscripted, the small things: a tender glance, a shared laughter, the sound of the person sleeping, the tears and the silences. If you get hooked on searching for the high of a spiritual experience, you will miss these sacred moments. And, more painfully, you will miss the dying person. This journey is not about us. It is about the other person.

Being present through the end is compassion in action. We learn to stay because we care. We step out of our comfort zone dropping our egocentric views because we care. We also learn to recognize our limitations and meet them with kindness because we care. Working with relationships and family dynamics, it can get messy. We will make mistakes, but we still care.

Our compassion and care get communicated through how we are. Before you visit, pause. Drop into presence - breathe, feel your body and consciously set a compassionate motivation. The dying person will sense your underlying good intention through your presence and that in itself can have a tremendously calming and reassuring effect on his mind and heart.



When become aware that you got trapped in the role of 'the giver' or trying just too hard, relax. Be kind to yourself and allow the dying person to share his gifts, wisdom and presence with you.

The Buddha taught loving-kindness as the antidote to fear. With the warmth and equanimity of loving-kindness, we can meet fear. We can hold space for the dying person and their families, community and sangha, and meet feelings of grief, anger, regret or guilt without getting enmeshed in them. In profound moments of compassion, you can do Tonglen.

With compassion, breathe in the distress or chaos, and with love, on your outbreath send the person your mental stability and peace.

There is no more powerful time to practice than around the time of death.

You can offer a meditation from a distance, or quietly at the bedside. This will help to create a peaceful and sacred space. In this space, not only the suffering part is received but all of who he is. He will feel seen and heard and can connect with his inner wisdom. In this healing space, distance, and the separation of you, me, and other melt away.

When you sit at the bedside of a dying person, standing at the threshold of life and death, you

can catch a glimpse of buddha nature. Not in an abstract, but experiential way. You can come to understand that the person across from you is more than her body, more than her dementia. She has buddha nature.

Also, the tenderness, the caring of the heart, even the question of "Can I do this...?" which is rooted in the wish to relieve suffering - all radiate from buddha nature, or basic goodness. It is from this nature that compassion radiates. It is this nature that gives you the courage to go towards something that you normally would fear.

I was recently asked what's the most important thing is when it comes to caring for the dying. It's about awareness and love. Unconditional love.

Not every life that has experienced brokenness will be healed before death. You may never be able to help resolve unfinished business or touch the depth of suffering or pain someone else experiences, but you will learn, with the strength of compassion, to be there, fully. The sense of isolation has been one of the hardest and most painful aspects of the pandemic. In the hallway of the nursing area at Spiritual Care Centre Sukhavati hangs a life-size painting of the Buddha. It shows the Buddha leaning over the bed of a dying disciple gently

holding his head. They are both surrounded by a group of monks. This painting holds a key message: End-of-life care needs community. It needs sangha.

As a Buddhist, I view death as a natural part of life. Children can be wonderful teachers in this regard. At Sukhavati, we cared for a father of two young girls, who had ALS. He was in the final grip of the illness, locked into his body, and needing twenty-four-hour care. His young wife came to visit almost every day with the girls. They played in the garden outside and moved around the house with infectious ease and naturalness that painted a smile on everyone's face.

After his death, we laid out his body in an open casket. We offered a short service, and while family and friends said their goodbyes, his daughters played next to the coffin. At the end of the service, each visitor put flowers gathered from the garden on his body. The girls had chosen two bright sunflowers. They laid them on their father's chest and then danced, like light-filled fairies, around their mom. Death was visible without it being frightening. There were tears, but life, vibrant and vivacious, continued. 

“ When become aware that you got trapped in the role of ‘the giver’ or trying just too hard, relax. Be kind to yourself and allow the dying person to share his gifts, wisdom and presence with you. ”

This quote is from the article "Being present through the end".



DEATH, THE GREAT OPPORTUNITY



By the Venerable Lama Dondrup

On Venerable Lama Dondrups illuminative teaching we can see death as a great opportunity, reflect on what death is, and how to take advantage of the opportunities that life offers us.

In Buddhism we see death as one phase of life. For something to die it must be alive, for something to be alive, at some point, it will have to die. Death only occurs in life. But when we die, what happens? What exactly dies? What is it that is alive now, and will one day die? What we are, the human being, Buddha defined as a psycho-physical system, that goes through different stages in a vital process.

According to this definition, we are made up of two main components: body and mind. Without abandoning the body, in Buddhism, we tend to focus more on the mind, since we consider that, it is the part that most affects and intervenes in the experience of happiness. In addition, the mind is the filter of perception, and at the same time, it is the creator of reality, since thoughts, sensations and emotions, and their interrelation with consciousness, are what

promote one state of mind or another. The body and the entire physical environment that surrounds us, is slower, and more compacted energy, that for a time, acts as an electromagnetic field, which houses the most subtle, and volatile aspect that is the mind.

From the Buddhist perspective, we can define death, as the severe change in the relationship between the gross and subtle worlds. The gross and the subtle cease to relate and condition, each other. The ties between the two are cut and each continues on its own.

We have texts and specific teachings on how, this process of separation, between both energies is, and on the different phases, through which the subtle world passes, until the next experience of relationship with the gross world. One of these texts, the most famous today, is the Bardo-Thodol, the Tibetan book of life and death. I hope that with this introduction, the idea that we have in Buddhism

of death has become clear, it is the end of a relationship between the subtle and physical world, nothing more. It is not the end of everything, it is not the final loss, it is not the great catastrophe. It is a change of state, in which the information continues its course, in a more subtle way, and therefore, not easily perceived, by the gross senses.

The uncontrolled inner process, generates constant suffering. All this framework, generates the life experience, and in Buddhism, it is called samsara, the continuous cycle of suffering. The information and tendencies, that each being has accumulated in the mind, are part of personal karma. To classify it, and to be able to eventually manage it, the information that leads to states of pain and suffering, is considered, negative or negative karma. We also find positive and neutral karma. To exit samsara, is only possible, by awakening the luminous power of consciousness.

All Buddhist technology is oriented towards that ultimate goal: awakening consciousness. Giving more power to consciousness, by empowering it, the information loses influence over the being. Meditation exercises, help us to see clearly, that the key element of this awakening, has to do with attention, since attention is the promoter of mental states. Depending on where and how attention is situated, the information will flow and produce experiences both, on a gross and subtle level. When attention is directed by information (karma), the wheel continues to turn endlessly. The training consists, of focusing it, on beneficial objectives, while avoiding, being distracted, by circumstances, arising from uncontrolled information. We can say that attention and intelligence, are the actions of consciousness. When they act automatically, consciousness itself, acts as a promoter of

information. The wheel of samsara is a sophisticated and precise cog, very difficult to stop. By training the attention, we educate the conscience, to liberate itself, from the tendencies that bind it to the past, and, at the same time, to activate, new and much more beneficial information. Keeping it, in that state, naturally awakens its luminosity, which allows you, to see reality as it is (wisdom), and all this, while enjoying unlimited, sublime joy. When we investigate consciousness, in depth, we clearly see, that it is made up of parts, and that, its essential characteristics are: luminosity and emptiness.

Thanks to the body, consciousness can discover information and detach itself from its negative influence. Thanks to the body, consciousness can also discover itself.

For Buddhism, the great mission of life is to obtain Enlightenment,

the expansion of consciousness. The day to day we live, is not designed for self-discovery. Strategies must be generated to make consciousness connect with the transcendent world. And that's where meditation on death becomes a great opportunity. Any life experience, that directs attention to the expansion of consciousness, generates merits. So this, in itself, is a possible meaning of life, according to Buddhism.

I sincerely believe, that to turn a circumstance into a great opportunity, you have to be very clear about, which is the greatest success for you. Great opportunities are not the same for everyone. Everyone has their own circumstances and goals. So if we do not have a clear and concise meaning of life, it will be very difficult for opportunities to appear, that give meaning to life. The clearer your sense of life, the more opportunities will appear before you.

“ DEATH IS A GREAT OPPORTUNITY, FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO LIVE LIFE, WITH TOTAL INTENSITY, AND ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE, WHO WANT TO EXPAND CONSCIOUSNESS, TO HELP OTHERS IN THE SAME GOAL. THE CLOSER YOU ARE TO DEATH, THE MORE VALUABLE IS YOUR PRESENT. ”



I suppose that you already have your sense of life clear. Ideally, it can be written in a sentence, and you have it visible somewhere, to remind you, when making important decisions.

What is your meaning of life? If you don't have it defined yet, one way to do it is, by asking yourself, over and over again, what for, until there is no higher what for. You will easily improve the phrase that defines your meaning of life in the future, so write the best you can at this time, without fear of being wrong. There is no wrong answer. If you find it difficult to express your meaning of life, ask yourself, how would I like the world to be for my grandchildren? Your answer may give you information.

Death is a great opportunity, for those who want to live life, with total intensity, and especially for those, who want to expand consciousness, to help others in the same goal. The closer you are to death, the more valuable is your present. For example what if you knew you were going to die in 48 hours?

I introduce the death as an opportunity from two points of view. From the point of view of one's own death, and from the point of view of the death of others. Also the process of death is presented in three different times: before, during and after.

FROM ONE'S OWN DEATH:

BEFORE: Meditating that death will come to me, helps me to:

- Value the life I live, every moment, every event
- Prioritize what is important, without feeling the loss of the rest
- Manage emergencies with more patience
- Practice more Dharma. The mundane world doesn't appeal to me that much
- Intensify spiritual practice. It helps me, overcome fatigue, and other things
- Raises relationships with others. If I am going to die soon I want authenticity and enjoy my friends, loved ones and so on

DURING: I prepare myself for the moment to be:

- Enjoying the process. I don't want to miss it, it has to be very special
- It will be a process without attachment and therefore without suffering
- I will be able to share the experience with people who want to live it
- I will be an example that inspires others to get seriously involved in the practice of the Dharma
- If I do it well, I will be able to help other beings, who have not prepared themselves as well as I am doing
- It is the great opportunity for consciousness, to reach the highest states of realization, I do not want to waste it

AFTER: Once the mind separates from the physical body:

- I will experience the higher planes of consciousness
- I will be attentive to learn from all the phases of the bardo to teach them better
- I will be able to share with others the blessings that I am enjoying
- I will be a being worthy of others making prayers for me, and that will make them generate merits
- My death and life will be inspiring examples for others
- Next rebirth will be in better condition for Dharma practice

FROM THE DEATH OF OTHERS:

BEFORE: Meditate that they will die at any time and without prior notice:

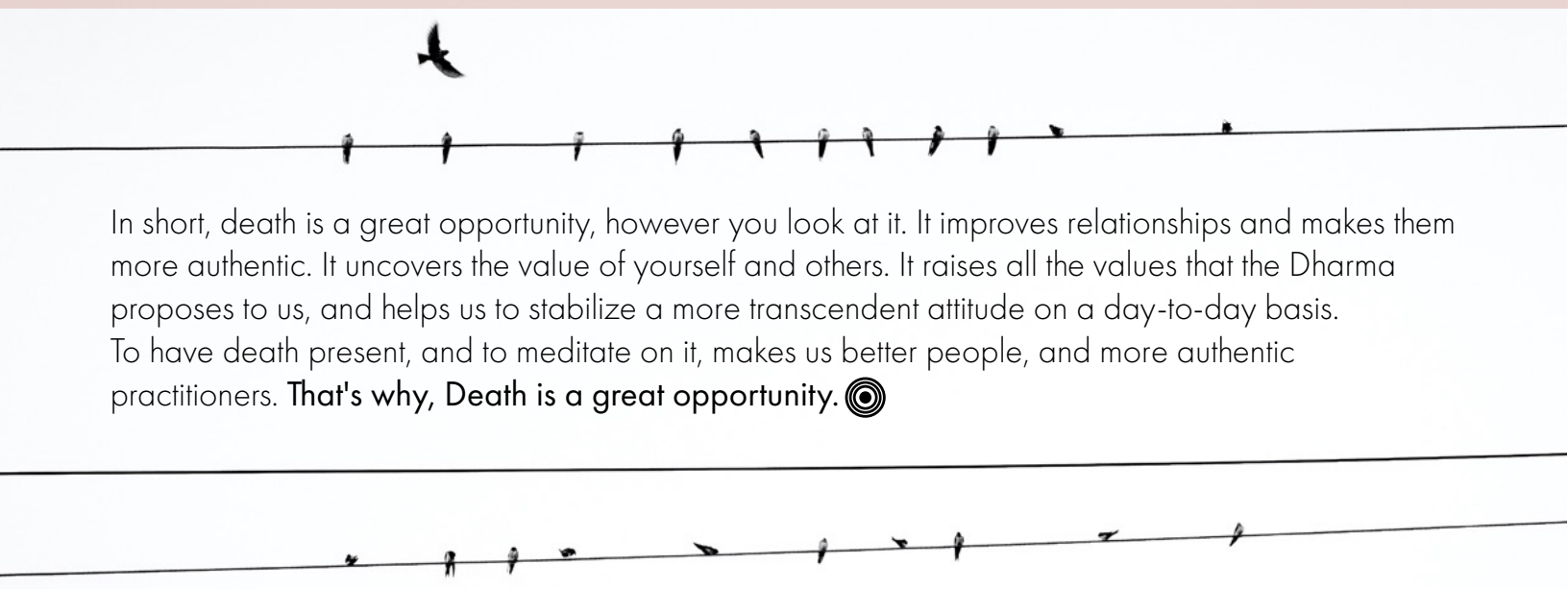
- This helps to forgive more easily
- Enhances the genuine enjoyment of moments with them
- We learn to be happy without them, less emotionally dependent
- Generates a transcendent attitude on a day-to-day basis
- Deactivates attachment, then unconditional love and compassion arise
- Increases true interest in the other and their circumstances

DURING: Light presence in their transit:

- Revitalizes the spiritual connection
- High level help
- Relaxes the possible personal fear of death
- Raises unconditional love and compassion
- Direct experience of the cycles of life
- Sharing clear inspiration and being inspired

AFTER: Accompany them through rituals:

- More positive grief management for helping the deceased.
- Educate the mind how to remember the deceased happily and without pain
- Improves involvement in daily practice
- Verify first hand that death is only a change of mental state, something continues
- Sharpens perceptions and intuition
- Connection with the invisible world, makes it present.

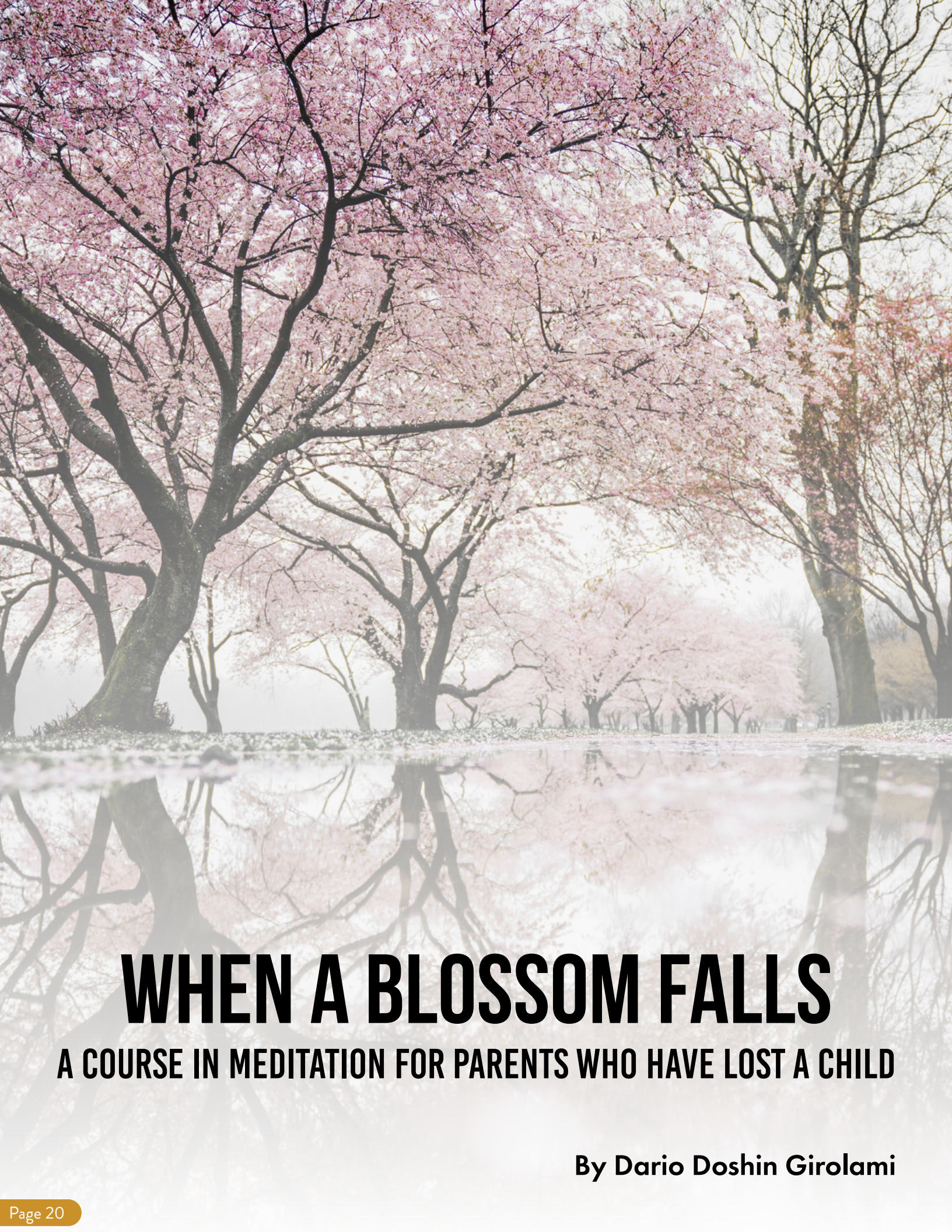
A minimalist line drawing of a horizontal wire with several small birds perched on it. One bird is shown in flight above the wire. The drawing is simple and elegant, using black lines on a white background.

In short, death is a great opportunity, however you look at it. It improves relationships and makes them more authentic. It uncovers the value of yourself and others. It raises all the values that the Dharma proposes to us, and helps us to stabilize a more transcendent attitude on a day-to-day basis. To have death present, and to meditate on it, makes us better people, and more authentic practitioners. **That's why, Death is a great opportunity.** ◎

VALUE LIFE EVERY MOMENT, EVERY EVENT

This quote is from the article "Death, a great opportunity".

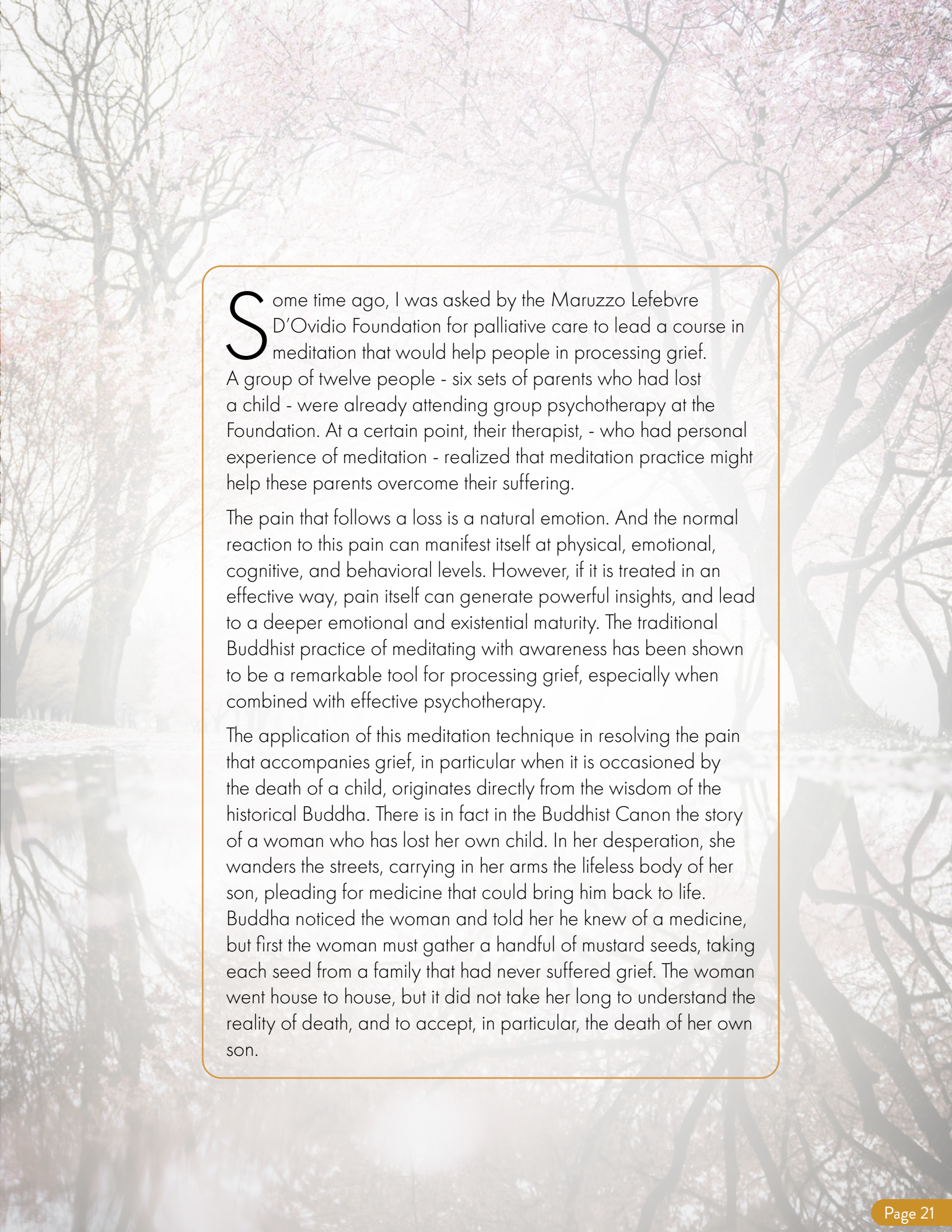




WHEN A BLOSSOM FALLS

A COURSE IN MEDITATION FOR PARENTS WHO HAVE LOST A CHILD

By Dario Doshin Girolami



Some time ago, I was asked by the Maruzzo Lefebvre D'Ovidio Foundation for palliative care to lead a course in meditation that would help people in processing grief. A group of twelve people - six sets of parents who had lost a child - were already attending group psychotherapy at the Foundation. At a certain point, their therapist, - who had personal experience of meditation - realized that meditation practice might help these parents overcome their suffering.

The pain that follows a loss is a natural emotion. And the normal reaction to this pain can manifest itself at physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral levels. However, if it is treated in an effective way, pain itself can generate powerful insights, and lead to a deeper emotional and existential maturity. The traditional Buddhist practice of meditating with awareness has been shown to be a remarkable tool for processing grief, especially when combined with effective psychotherapy.

The application of this meditation technique in resolving the pain that accompanies grief, in particular when it is occasioned by the death of a child, originates directly from the wisdom of the historical Buddha. There is in fact in the Buddhist Canon the story of a woman who has lost her own child. In her desperation, she wanders the streets, carrying in her arms the lifeless body of her son, pleading for medicine that could bring him back to life. Buddha noticed the woman and told her he knew of a medicine, but first the woman must gather a handful of mustard seeds, taking each seed from a family that had never suffered grief. The woman went house to house, but it did not take her long to understand the reality of death, and to accept, in particular, the death of her own son.

Buddha also taught that the contemplation of death is the most noble of all contemplations. It is like the footprint of an elephant: the footprints of all other animals fit inside it. So, all other contemplations are subsets of the contemplation of death.

The First Noble Truth, as Buddha defined it, is that life is suffering. The Second Noble Truth is that the origin of suffering is attachment. More specifically, Buddha teaches that reality is impermanent. Everything changes constantly: what is born, dies. Nothing is forever. When we become attached to things or people and delude ourselves that they will last forever, when those things or people die, or the relationships end, that is when suffering arises.

The practice of meditation on the breath trains us in the observation of impermanence. Breath—like the present moment—is here for an instant and then passes. Bringing attention to the breath makes it possible for us to realize that breath is life and death at every instant. It is not a coincidence that Zen Buddhism teaches that we die at each breath.

But Buddhism also sees death as a normal process, a natural part of life. In Zen, death is considered a teaching that reveals the truth of impermanence, of compassion, of interdependence.

Paralleling the five stages of grief described by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance), the Buddhist Zen tradition has developed teachings in which interior tranquility helps one to accept rather than deny; the practice of patience helps to calm anger and negativity; the development of a wider perspective, through mindfulness, helps to alleviate depression and pain; the practice of non-attachment helps in the process of deep acceptance and metabolization of grief.

Compassion, patience, and being sensitive to the human condition can help remove what is blocking us and help us be more tolerant of our aversion to suffering. This can lead to a profound acceptance of what happens.

When we open ourselves to the immensity, the mystery of life, whatever has been causing us anguish dissolves, and we can enter the powerful dimension of the unknown.

Once, a student asked Katagiri Roshi—Japanese Zen master, third abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center: “What is the difference between life and death?” He replied, “There is none! They are the same thing. They are two sides of the same coin. It is we who separate them. But life and death are two aspects of the same reality.”

Lavoisier’s law, according to which nothing is created and nothing is destroyed, is easy for us westerners to understand. Can we manage to see life and death from the same perspective?

In the Zen tradition, we recite the Heart of Perfect Wisdom Sutra, the central teaching of which is that emptiness is form and form is emptiness; emptiness does not differ from form, and form does not differ from emptiness. To understand this profound teaching, we may take the example of the wave and water. Water has no form but may take the form of a wave. But the wave and the water are not separable. Without water, there is no wave. They are one and the same, that is, two sides of the same coin. The reality in which we live is form, but—from the Zen perspective—it is the manifestation of that which has no form, that is, of the Absolute. “Absolute” in the sense of “free from,” not understandable, not thinkable, unless it takes a form.

Let us try now to substitute the terms “form and emptiness” for the terms “life and death.” What is the difference between form and emptiness? What is the difference between life and death? Form is not different from emptiness, emptiness is not different from form. Life is not different from death. Death is not different from life.

A person is seen from behind, sitting on a dark, craggy rock. They are wearing a light-colored hooded jacket and dark pants. They are looking out over a vast expanse of white, fluffy clouds that stretch to the horizon. The sky above the clouds is a mix of soft pinks, oranges, and yellows, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

“ The practice of meditation on the breath trains us in the observation of impermanence. Breath—like the present moment—is here for an instant and then passes. ”

“ Form is not different from emptiness, emptiness is not different from form. Life is not different from death. Death is not different from life. ”

These quotes are from the article "When a blossom falls. A course in meditation for parents who have lost a child".

Once a week, for many months, the twelve course participants were given these teachings, after forty minutes of group meditation. In the very lively discussions that always followed meditation and the Dharma talk, the parents were able to express, without fear, their deep suffering.

A theme that they often came back to was injustice: "It was unjust, it was a mistake, that my son died when he was only eight years old," they said to me, in tears. With huge respect for their pain, very gently, I explained to them that in our western culture we tend not to think about death. When we do have to confront it, we delude ourselves that the moment of death should arrive when someone is around eighty or ninety years old. So if death arrives before then, we consider it a misfortune or an injustice. But if we observe reality mindfully - as meditation

teaches us to do - we realize that death happens when it happens, and not when we expect it, and we realize that there is nothing wrong with this. If we observe nature we can see that not all the buds on a plant become flowers or fruit. Many buds fall. But their fall causes no harm. The trajectory of their fall is easy and perfect. Zen teaches that this is "the Way of things."

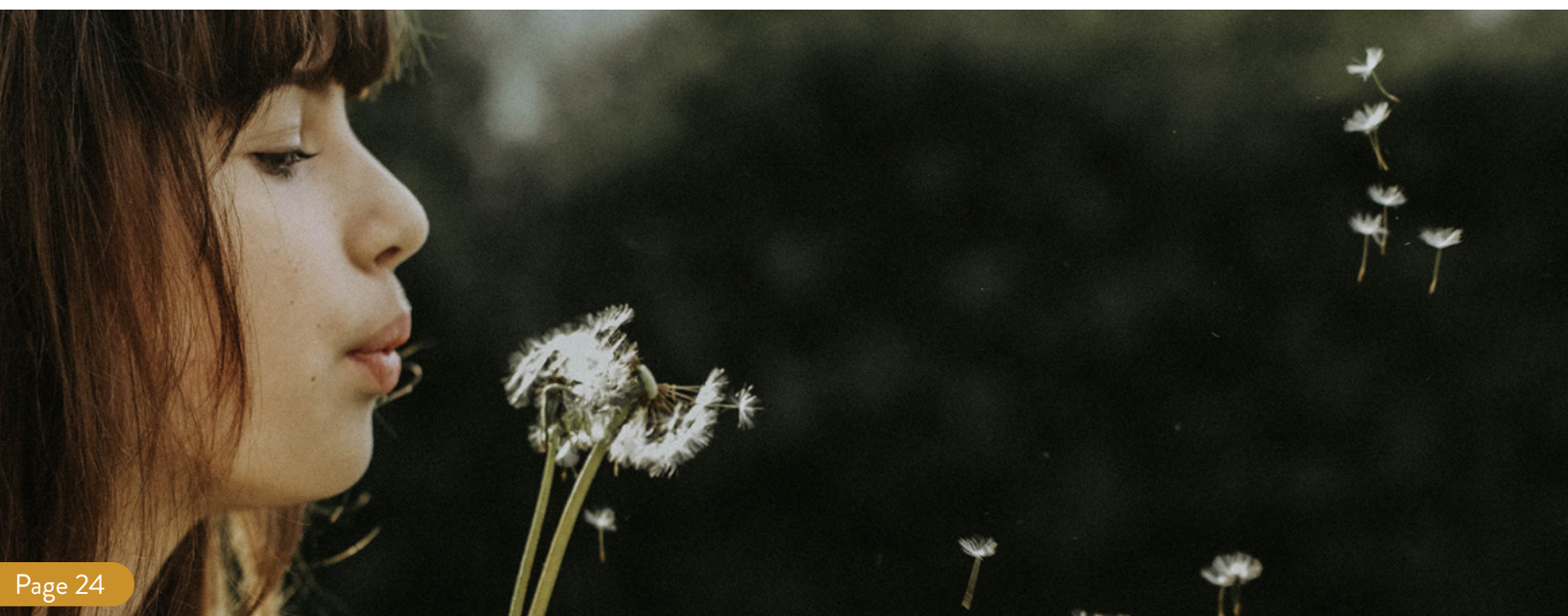
In the same manner, when the leaves fall in autumn, they don't all fall together on 22 September, on the morning of the equinox. On the contrary, some fall earlier and some, later. Nothing bad happened to those that fell earlier. It is simply the Way of things, the way that things function in this impermanent reality.

Little by little, this teaching became absorbed into the hearts of the parents like a healing balm. Meditation by meditation, they widened their

perspective, including thus in their idea of life the death that manifests itself at all times. The image of the bud that falls spoke profoundly to their psyche and liberated them from the oppressive feeling of injustice, which had done nothing more than add pain to the already terrible pain of their loss.

But beside this there was also a sense of blame: "I didn't do enough," they told me, sobbing, "I should have protected or cured my child."

Once more, the practice of meditation came to their aid. If we look deeply, we may notice that it is the ego that produces phrases of this kind, in a kind of delirium of omnipotence. What can we do, in fact, when faced with an incurable illness? What can we do when faced with a natural disaster? Clearly, it is not within our power to change such things, but what we can most



surely do is develop compassion for ourselves, for our children, and for all sentient beings immersed in a world that we cannot control. Compassion is the cure. It may not cure the body, but it can certainly cure the heart. A sense of guilt, meanwhile, cures nothing; rather, it makes the pain more obdurate, more difficult to cure.

This teaching, too, gradually created an opening, and forgiveness and compassion took the place of guilt in the hearts of the suffering parents.

Finally, a powerful fear emerged: "If I open my heart to the Way of things, if I let go of my guilt, haven't I then forgotten my child?" they asked me, almost terrified.

People who begin meditation often do not understand well the teaching of abiding in the present moment and make the mistake of believing that this means forgetting the past. But the problem here is not our memories. Memory is an extraordinary function and absolutely

necessary for living. The problem, rather, lies in our being invaded against our own will by memories and projections that drag us away from the present moment. When that happens, we are like lost and melancholy ghosts, wandering about in a misty past.

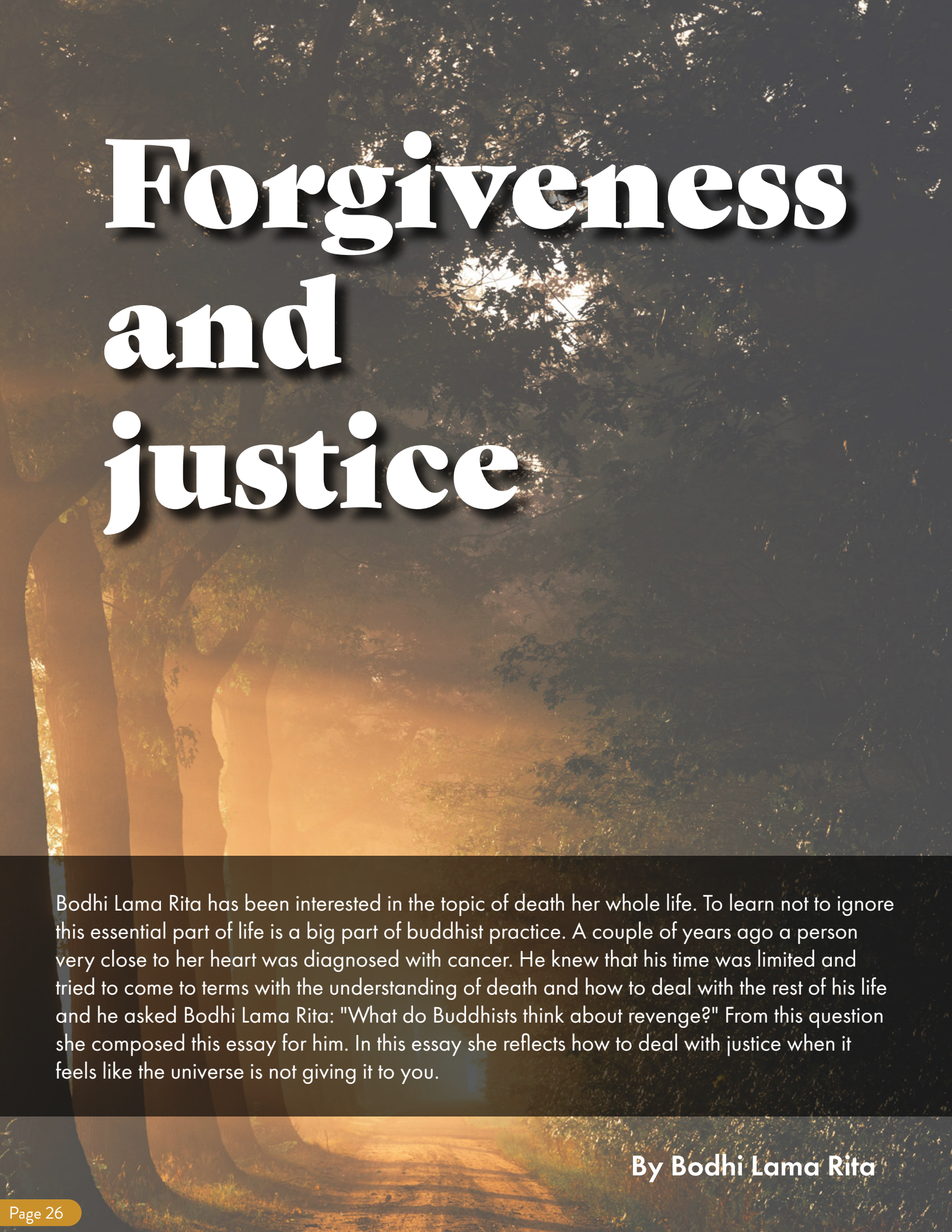
The present moment is the only real dimension. The past is past. The future is still to be. The only dimension that really exists is the present moment.

When they realized this, the parents found their minds were clearer: they had opened themselves to the reality of the present moment without thereby forgetting their children who were no longer present.

Listening deeply to these teachings, carrying them over into their own lives, the parents little by little, over the course of a year, opened themselves to life.

Some even decided to have another child - a clear sign that they had overcome their trauma - while others simply began to smile again and to see their child in every bud. ◎



A photograph of a misty forest path. Sunlight filters through the dense canopy of trees, creating a warm, golden glow. The path is narrow and appears to lead into the distance, surrounded by tall, slender trees. The overall atmosphere is serene and contemplative.

Forgiveness and justice

Bodhi Lama Rita has been interested in the topic of death her whole life. To learn not to ignore this essential part of life is a big part of buddhist practice. A couple of years ago a person very close to her heart was diagnosed with cancer. He knew that his time was limited and tried to come to terms with the understanding of death and how to deal with the rest of his life and he asked Bodhi Lama Rita: "What do Buddhists think about revenge?" From this question she composed this essay for him. In this essay she reflects how to deal with justice when it feels like the universe is not giving it to you.

By Bodhi Lama Rita

We think forgiving means losing.

We think that if we forgive those who did us harm we admit defeat. That forgiveness means that what they have done to us suddenly becomes okay. We think we give them absolution if we forgive them.

And even worse, we give them the right to do others as much harm as they did us!

This means forgiveness is irresponsible.

It is admitting that we won't ever win. We let them get away without any justice.

And I personally think this is a pity. Because forgiveness is not something we do for another person. Primarily we forgive to heal our own heart. It doesn't mean that wrong becomes right. It doesn't mean that we should close our eyes and give up.

If we hold grudges and hate towards those who harmed us this hatred will eat us up from the inside. Really, the only person

we harm when we hate is ourselves.

The other person might or might not feel the hate or grudge we hold against them. Maybe they even already forgot what they did to us.

Or maybe they had deep regret for what they did to us and found a way to change.

Or maybe they hate themselves for what they did to us.

None of these things make the harm right. They don't make the pain disappear.

But it is not on us to decide if they suffered enough or if they deserve to change and to be happy. Because we could be wrong as well.

If you have ever found yourself on both sides of the equation as the harm doer and the harm-receiver you know what I'm talking about.

As the harm-doer I carry a kind of guilt and I know that in many cases I cannot just make that ok. It takes a lot of strength and power to step back into the peoples' lives we hurt in the past, look them in the eyes and sincerely apologise.

Maybe with a few years of effort it is possible to repair a relationship that has been damaged in this kind of way. But the decision to take that apology, or to repair the

relationship is not mine. It is the decision of the harmed and as the harm-doer we cannot take that away from them. If they want to engage in the long, often painful, repair of the relationship it is wonderful. And if they don't want or are not ready that must be ok as well.

I need to accept both options, because in both cases I am doing my best to be the best person possible.

Not the person that made that mistake in the past, but a person that grows, learns and does everything to be there for others and asks for forgiveness even if it might be futile.

This is why I don't need to carry the burden of the guilt around with me.

And we also have to understand that some people might wish us harm because of what we did to them. But it is our decision to carry that guilt or not and we shouldn't wish anybody to wish others harm.

If we are the ones who have been harmed it is different. As harmed one I have to deal with myself differently. Just to reiterate I cannot give absolution to those who did me harm, and I cannot, by my forgiveness, make it ok. Everybody needs to live with themselves. And it is my duty to help those who harmed and

those who have been harmed. Many people don't even know that what they do is harmful and those who do inflict harm purposefully are extremely rare. Those who do bad purposefully will have to experience the consequences of their actions. I don't know how to talk about this without talking about karma. Because in a worldly sense there are so many things that are unfair. Seemingly random horrible things happen to some and not to others.

If it was true that we only had one life then why shouldn't we use that life to get ahead as much as possible, without caring about anybody else. It would not matter because we will all be gone soon anyway and then

it doesn't matter anymore who suffered and who inflicted that suffering for what purpose. This idea then would give me the right for my revenge. Because how else is justice supposed to happen? "If the universe is not gonna give me justice then I have to do it myself"

But, my friends, the question arises "what even is justice?" Is it justice that a person who has been misused by their father becomes aggressive and beats others because they never learned to control their emotions? Is it justice to cut the hand off a mother who stole to feed her children? Is it justice to kill the person who takes revenge on my father for their death of their mother?

Wouldn't have the person that takes revenge again be killed?

To illustrate these points I have described the term "justice" in three different ways.

First the "felt justice". It is the feeling of justice being served when I pay back the person who harmed me. Unfortunately our feelings will always want to add a bit more. Here an example: If person A hits person B with a force of 3 person B will feel a much stronger impact than person A because they are the ones being hit. In their perceived reality person B received a 5. This is why person B will hit back a bit stronger to make person A understand that what they did



was not acceptable. Person B might hit back with a force of 6. And person A receives an 8. This is disproportional to the small hit of an impact of 3 they just gave and a fight will very likely ensue.

This shows us that what happens to us always feels worse to us because we were the ones it happened to. Why does it hurt so much when we are cheated on, and when somebody else cheats on their spouse at the other side of the world we couldn't care less?

We give back more than we receive, but how is that supposed to lead to justice? The person we did "justice to" will not feel that way. They will feel that we did them injustice. And this can continue on and on until forever. This is how whole families are able to fight for generations. Everybody tries to serve "justice" but it doesn't work.

The second kind of justice is the one that is imposed to us by a higher power like a law or a government. It is a way to try to have a system that is just. This is different all over the world depending on the country or the laws of a country or community. Sometimes these laws come close to justice but they can't take into consideration properly the special circumstances everybody has.



So is it law in some countries to cut the hand of someone that steals. If that is a mother who cares for her child is that just? In the eyes of the law: yes. In some countries the color of your skin determines how long you will be imprisoned for minor felonies. Is that just? Well, it is extremely hard for biased humans (and we all are biased some way or the other) to make unbiased decisions.

The last kind of justice is the justice that is imposed on us by ourselves. If we do something harm- or hurtful nothing good will come from that. If we do good, good will come from that. Not because of a higher power or a law, but because of our own infallible law every being exists in accord to. When we think or do something it isn't just gone after the fact.

There is still a remittance, a memory of what we did or thought. That will effect us now and it will effect our future. What we do or how we think in the future will be very much based on that memory. This means even if the act or the thought is long gone the memory or the impact or imprint of that thought still exists. This imprint or impact can have different kinds of effects. And those effects can effect us earlier or later. But as a matter of fact it can't be forgotten because an imprint doesn't have the power to forget. Everything we do has an impact on our future self and the people around us.

With this kind of infallible law we don't need to wish for justice to happen. Justice will happen no matter if we wish for it or not.

So when somebody does harm I don't need to try to create justice. Every being will experience the results of their actions sooner or later. I should take care of my own system before starting to judge others.

That does not mean that I need to let others take advantage of me just because im a buddhist. I cannot stop the responsibility I have for myself and others as long as I walk on this earth. If I have the ability to help others to prevent their suffering in the future I should do so. That is the responsibility I have as a human being.

If I can prevent them from either causing harm or experiencing it I will do so. And with this kind of support I help them to help themselves. And most definitely help myself, because I also don't want to have pain inflicted on me.

But if it is too late and the harm has already been done I only

have very limited possibilities. On one hand I can harbour ill will and grudges and let those eat me up from the inside. This won't make me happy, and the imprint this will leave for the future is also not a happy one.

First, I need to accept what happened and that it is not reversible. Only after this step of acceptance the forgiveness process can start. Forgiveness doesn't just happen. It is hard work, but we have to remember that we don't do it for the other person primarily. We do it for ourselves. For our mental health.

Forgiveness doesn't mean to forget. Because every harm that is inflicted on us doesn't make us more ignorant. In the best case we learn how to deal with those who have harmed us, which in itself means we learned something. In the worst case scenario we can distance ourselves, but we don't have to keep holding a grudge.

If we where the one that inflicted harm this decision is not just up to us. Some may want to break off contact entirely, and others may not want to break off contact. This is a diffcult situation and the solution is not only in my hands.

But the decision to forgive is something that no one can take away from me or give to me. That decision is entirely up to me. I have no power over other people and what they do. I am not god. But I have power over myself. And I can use this power to either harm or to help myself. Forgiving is the greatest kind of self-help. Because when I harbour hatred towards others, I keep these people as my prisoners in my heart, and that's where they hurt me. Only with forgiveness can I let go of my trauma and start healing. ◎



**“ Forgiveness doesn't just happen.
It is hard work, but we have to
remember that we don't do it
for the other person primarily.
We do it for ourselves.
For our mental health. ”**

This quote is from the article "Forgiveness and justice".



Walking together on the path of sorrow



By Arja Aryatara Sihvola

BEING NEAR SOMEBODY WHO HAS LOST HIS LOVED ONE GIVES A PRECIOUS OPPORTUNITY TO PRACTISE THE FOUR IMMEASURABLE MINDS.

While death is one of the natural, common things for everyone, it is often seen as a frightening thing in the Western culture and physical death is seen as the definite end. For this reason many who have lost loved ones are left alone. People avoid meeting them or offer them some worn-out phrases of consolation hurrying then quickly into their own lives. At worst the grieving person is blamed for his sorrow which is seen as a result of excessive affection and crasping.

However, grief is necessary because it is a bridge connecting the earlier stage of life to the new one. There has often been talk about grief work that the mourner should do. Perhaps it would be better to see that grief works in the grieving person. It shakes and shapes him so that he can continue his life after the loss.

When grief shakes and shapes a person he goes through a heavy process and needs a supporter alongside him.

If you dare to walk with the grieving you can have a valuable experience. You learn to see human life and death in a unique way. It also gives a good opportunity to practise the Four immeasurable Minds: metta, karuna, mudita and upekkha.

It is a great help if a mourner and a supporter share a similar outlook of life. But if the grieving person does not know for example Buddhism the time of grief is not the time to start teaching him unless he himself takes the initiative and asks about it. The best way to tell about Buddha's teachings is to act according to them. If the loving kindness of metta, the genuine empathy of karuna and the calmness and equanimity of upekkha are present in the supporter they tell more than any Dharma talk. When the strongest waves of loss are over the supporter can bring in mudita and remind the mourner of all the positive things that are still in his/her life and guide him/her to see them and find

strengthening things and connect with them. During his own meditation the supporter can send loving, encouraging wishes to the mourner.

Walking together on the path of sorrow can raise many important questions: Have I really understood what interbeing and impermanence really are? What it means to be genuinely present to another person? What is my attitude to death and dying?



THE FOLLOWING GUIDELINES TO A SUPPORTER ARE BASED ON LISTENING TO GRIEVING PERSONS AND THEIR WISHES.

Patient listening. The mourner repeats the same things over and over again. It's his way of getting used to change. Mindful, patient listening is a great help.

Honesty. If you don't know what to do to help the mourner, ask him/her directly how you can support him/her. Don't try to be more clever or wise than you are. Genuine caring is enough.

Acceptance. The person can be bitter about what he is experiencing. He should not be blamed for that. Also accept that you will not be able to change what has happened or speed up the grief process.

Impermanence. The life of the mourner changes with the loss. It will not be the same again. But sorrow, the mourner and the supporter are all changing, too. As everything else in life.

Peace. Grief brings out a wide variety of emotions in the person going through a loss. Accept his emotional states, but don't get too involved in them. It is important that the supporter does not lose his peace of mind. Practise upekkha besides karuna. Walking together on the path of sorrow can be hard. Take care of yourself by meditating, walking in the nature, reading empowering texts.

Practicality. Helping with everyday tasks is important. Their running smoothly gives security and hope.

Cooperation. If the mourner has several friends, it is wise to take turns. Then the supporters are allowed to rest from time to time and the mourner is not left alone for too long periods.

Confidence. Sorrow is not a strange disease, but a part of human life. Even if the sorrow does not completely disappear, it will change and become bearable. It also increases understanding of human life, reminds of its impermanence and strengthens love and understanding between people. ☉



A person with long dark hair tied back, wearing a light-colored t-shirt and dark pants, is sitting on a wooden bench. They are facing away from the camera, looking out over a vast, hazy landscape of rolling hills and valleys. The sky is a warm, golden-orange color, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. In the upper left corner, there is a large, semi-transparent orange circle containing a list of words in a white, cursive font.

*Patient listening
Honesty
Acceptance
Impermanence
Peace
Practicality
Cooperation
Confidence*



FACING DEATH

By Gernot Landschein

For human beings, the fear of death and dying is the biggest in life. If we are genuine, we must admit that we simply don't know for sure what will happen. The very fact that everyone must die is the utmost expression of impermanence and uncertainty.

As a medical doctor you are constantly witnessing death and dying. Therefore many people think that doctors are "cool", because they are confronted with it so often. But if it comes to their own death and dying, it is quite the opposite. Having seen others die does not give a special insight into your own journey. Experience is not your property.

Experience and realization are quite different.

In our society, being confronted with death is almost a "privilege", because unlike in former times, death and dying have become a taboo, it has

become a fact that we try to avoid to deal with. In modern society, there are fewer and fewer people who ever saw a dead body, let alone witnessing someone dying; it is too unpleasant, too uncomfortable. It is a reminder that impermanence is not a concept, it is a painful reality, if we are fixating on what we would like to have.

The old lady

In the early 80ies I was working as surgeon-in-training. One afternoon, an old lady was admitted to the hospital; she was suffering from an acute and incurable circulatory disorder. Her legs were already starting to get darker and darker and it was obvious that nothing could be done. In spite of all the analgesics she was in great pain and all of us on the ward felt quite helpless and filled with sadness.

The next morning, at the start of my duty, the nurse immediately sent me to the patient's room. To my surprise, the old lady sat completely upright in her bed, in a very dignified manner. She kindly asked me to sit at her side. I asked her if she still had severe pain, which she affirmed with a distressed expression on her face. It was obvious that she knew she was about to die.

Then she reached under her bed with her hand, pulled out a bottle and said, "Would you please make me happy and have a glass of champagne with me?" At that moment, I was utterly confused - it blew my mind. I couldn't hold on to any concept about what was happening. Without hesitation, I clinked glasses with her and took a sip. A little later I was called out of the room. When I came back, I realized that she had stopped breathing...

Just being with my wife when she passed away

My wife was suffering from very aggressive cancer. When it became obvious that nothing could be done any more, it was her wish to die at home. So on Friday afternoon we left the clinic. A team for palliative care was expected for the beginning of the following week, and as a doctor I felt quite confident to handle the situation until then. But in the evening of the same day her dyspnoea became so pronounced that it was impossible to handle it at home. So - with utter remorse - I called the ambulance to return to the clinic. With great sadness I realized that the concept of being with her at home, trying to

be husband, doctor and male nurse at once, was a big illusion. I spent the whole night sitting at her bedside, and in spite of the situation, I realized I could finally relax and just BE with her. There was no chance to think about my thoughts, all views became completely meaningless during that night. No chance to escape into anything that I could fixate on.

In the early morning, when the first sun-rays touched her face, her breath stopped, her heart stopped beating, and she passed away. For what felt like hours she was there and not there at the same time.....

Since that time, a very personal daily practice of wakefulness occurs: there is a feeling of her decelerating heart beat, her last soft out-breath. And this is a reminder that this will happen to me, too. It is just a short flash, and then it is over.

Sometimes it comes up automatically, sometimes I bring it about consciously. It has absolutely nothing to do with mourning or conceptualization, or "working on your grief" as some people say. It is a flash – and that's it.

I think this is the greatest gift she had given me.



"You may die soon!"

Last year I was diagnosed with severe lung disease, one you can die from in a very short time. And after the examination at the clinic, I was told that I might not stay alive for more than a few weeks. On hearing this, my mind came to a complete HALT. And then, gradually, there was a kind of funny relaxation. I realized how many goals were hidden in my mind, projects of future dharma programs to "progress" on the path; moving to another city, buying a new computer, working for a campaign for our dharma centre etc.,etc.

It became crystal clear that this was all meaningless. That I could only relate to what I had received, understood, practiced and maybe had realized. I thought of my root teacher and felt tremendous appreciation for all that he had given me; I felt rich, privileged and humble.

During my stay in the hospital, there was this funny thing with the daily ward round routine. Patients are regularly asked: "How are you?" And the patient is expected to start describing her or his pain, discomfort or mood. And I always heard myself answer: "thank you, I feel great". Which made everybody laugh, also because they realized it was genuine, I think.

Right before the general anaesthesia - which was

necessary for a complete examination - it came to my mind that I might not wake up again. It was a shocking reminder. And my thoughts started to move about like a swarm of bees. At that point I remembered a story that I heard about my teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. At the time when he was a teenage monk in Tibet, he and his fellow monks were passing a building in front of which a big, wild dog with huge jaws was chained. The dog kept barking at them in a very aggressive and terrifying way. The young monks passed by as fast as they could. But then they realized that the dog had somehow managed to get rid of the chain and was chasing after them. In complete horror, the young monks tried to escape in all directions. But at some point Chögyam Trungpa stopped, turned around and then ran fast and resolutely towards the dog. And the dog stopped, turned around and then walked back to the house. With that image in mind, I completely relaxed and felt clear and peaceful. Then, when the general anaesthetic worked, I lost my consciousness.

After the anaesthesia I was sent home, because the specialists told me that nothing could be done from their side. Fortunately, with the help of one of my former

Note: Ironically, while the author was working on these simple lines, he was surprised by a heart attack. Back home from the hospital now, he enjoys the brilliant presence of everything and the things and beings that parade by. And keeps trying not to forget that ignorance is our basic problem.





teachers in Tibetan medicine, my health improved and I survived until now.

One of my first dharma teachers was almost clinically dead twice. After he recovered, he met his master again.

He assured his master that he was feeling much better. After a while, his master said: "Well, so you think you are going to live forever? Again?"

Death and dying are always imminent, but we like to ignore that. Charming slogans like "be here now" do not really help. But the possibility of waking up is always there, too.

Since last year, I realize again and again, how I keep ignoring those experiences, forgetting them or thinking that now I know. It is just too easy to return to one's habitual ways. Just having

an experience and thinking that now you know is not enough – it leads to deception.

As sentient beings, we all try to avoid any form of discomfort. But if you manage to relate to your inherent wakefulness – again and again – it is possible to face discomfort, and it is just what it is – you are in contact with reality. If we are stuck with fear, which has to do with fixating on concepts, feelings and thoughts, we are unable to be with the flow of what is happening.

But the reminder of a simple fact of life – that you will die – can wake you up. It does not stay, you have to practice it. Musical notes on paper do not make any sound; you have to play it, you must hit a note, or a chord. You can't hold on to the

sound, the tone or the melody, but if you keep playing it, it can wake you up, again and again. As it is said, the good thing about impermanence is that it is impermanent.

Complete liberation from fear is possible, if only for a moment; fearlessness that comes from seeing clearly without judgement; looking without judgement, not thinking about it or covering up, facing the uncomfortable – one can do that without having to become a hero.

So this is what I can offer. If it is touching a chord, please keep strumming it, that would be great. ◎

With utmost gratitude and love for all my teachers.





BUDDHISM & HUMANISM

Learning from the pandemic,
a revolutionary alliance in
the face of death and dying.

By Lama Lhündrup



We do not believe what we know. In other words, the Coronavirus teaches us many things that we pretend not to know. Epidemics seem to be reminders, calling up the fragility of our existence and of our social systems, bringing back to memory the face of the absolute, of God or of the reality of impermanence, depending on the point of view. In this sense, they are a spur to understand the relationship we have with death, which naturally reveals our relationship to life. The reality of impermanence and death is at the center of Eastern as well as Western wisdom: "All that is born, dies", "all compound phenomena are impermanent", says the Buddha and "we die from living", said Heraclitus.

Have we caught the plague?

For a religious person as for a humanist, the relation to death is the "big deal" that conditions the vision and the way of life. Close to us, I am thinking about the work of the French writer, Albert Camus who made of his novel, "The Plague" a poignant **lesson of humanism**. His genius

puts forward the ethics inherent in the human heart which pushes him, against all odds, to be supportive and active in relieving suffering. He affirms the value of virtues, the legitimate aspiration to happiness and the beauty of human dignity in the face of death. This, without calling for a metaphysical or ideological system. Doctor Rieux, hero of "The Plague", heals and makes his job of healing a man's duty. "If I believed in God Almighty, I would stop healing men, leaving him to do so," he says. When he asks his friend Tarrou, who is not a doctor, why he takes care of the sick? The latter answered: "I don't know, my morals may be", "and which one?" Rieux retorts, "**understanding**", answers Tarrou. He will die of it.

The marriage of an Eastern and Western humanism

Understanding and loving is the whole story. Tarrou's morality does not come from an external authority. His morality is that of "human understanding". It is because he understands human reality with his heart that he acts. This agnostic attitude,

“All compound phenomena are impermanent.”
Buddha

intelligent and at the same time **altruistic** to the point of sacrifice, shows us that there is in Western humanism a very rich source of connivance with the ethical teaching of the Buddha whose source is also "understanding".

Even though, in another respect, the "Reason" opposed to the "religious faith" pushes Camus to the point of making the **absurd** the post-modern philosophy par excellence and the "Revolted man" its herald, would not the Dharma that reconciles reason and its overcoming, without resorting to the monotheist joker, be the answer to the **metaphysical abyss** opened by the author of "The Stranger"? Meursault, the suicidal stranger of the eponymous novel, is a stranger to himself because he does not know himself, he does not know the nature of his mind. He dies a fool (meurt sot)! This issue, which we will not develop

here, may be an interesting part of the encounter of the **Dharma with the West**.

What matters to us here is that beyond beliefs or nonbelief, Buddhists and Humanists join each other on **fundamental human values** that are part of our character as homo sapiens; in that respect they are universal. Matthieu Ricard, in his book "Altruism, the power of compassion to change the world and yourself", has shown it well. The great physician, as the Buddha is sometimes called, speaks in the same vein, even if he goes further. The Bhagavan,

the Blessed One incorporates in the humanistic ethic, a primordial wisdom that comes from the knowing and experience of the **nature of mind** itself.

The Buddha, the Knower, does not tell us that we can suppress suffering, illness, old age and death, but that we have the capacity to free ourselves from its bondage by realizing, through contemplation, the **emptiness of the suffering self**. This experience of the Buddha's awakening is known as the liberation from both fundamental **ignorance** and the blindness of intelligence in all its forms. This is not unrelated to Albert Camus' observation:

"The evil in the world almost always comes from ignorance, and good will can do as much damage as bad will if it is not enlightened. Men are more good than bad, and in truth that is not the point. But they are more or less ignorant, and this is what is called virtue or vice, the most despairing vice being that of ignorance which believes it knows everything and which then allows itself to kill. The murderer's soul is blind, and there is no true goodness or beautiful love without clear-sightedness."



Four medical realities

What does this have to do with what we can learn from the pandemic? We can see an axiological relationship, that is one relating to the values that structure and animate our perception of ourselves and our way of life. If we are sincere, we learn that, in front of the reality of impermanence, suffering and the greedy or blind egotistical gestures and postures of personal and institutional powers, we have the freedom to draw on the human values that are present in our heritage and in our hearts. We also have the good fortune to be able to transform ignorance and its destructive passions by drawing on the **primordial sources** of the Buddha's teachings which illuminate with dazzling clarity the timeless roots of human experience and provide the means to realize its highest potential, here and now.

In this time of pandemic, we may recall the medical paradigm of the Buddha's **four noble truths**, not as a substitute for science, but to renew our experience of life in light of wisdom. These truths are realities: suffering, the cause of suffering, sanity, and the path that is the cure for achieving sanity. By understanding them as such, the four noble realities can help us recognize the reality of suffering and motivate us to transform

“We die from living.”
Heraclitus

its causes; they can vividly remind us of the reality of our fundamental inner health and that we are healthy before we are sick; finally, it is the reality of the path that plants the seeds of confidence in the therapy restoring the original sanity which is harmony, happiness and freedom.

A virus revealing deeper ills

The Coronavirus reminds us not only that we are mortal as individuals but that our globalized techno-scientific society is mortal too. The virus exposes the underbelly of the multi-crisis that is shaking our modern civilization and takes part in its foreseeable collapse.

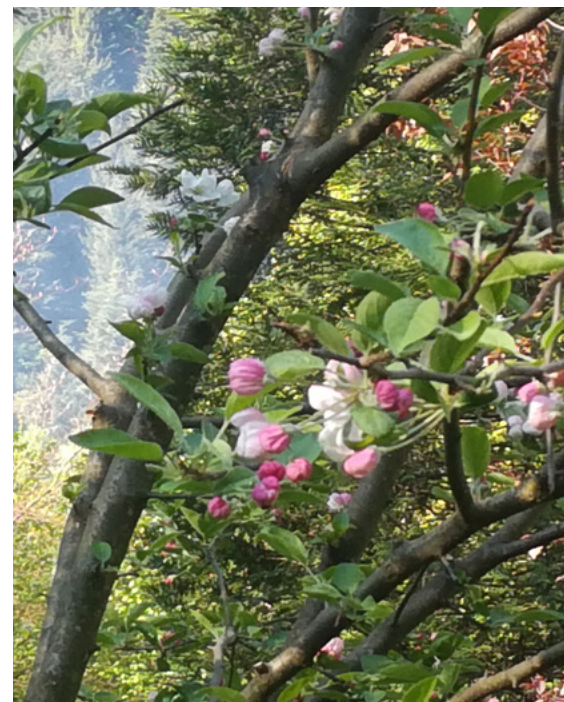
The denial of death is perhaps the first axiom of our modernity and the fundamental brick on which its horizon is built: individualism. To adhere unfailingly to the omnipotence of the individual, one must **deny his death**. That may be our thickest veil.

A crisis of intelligence

Denys Rinpoche, meditation master and superior of the Rimay Buddhist Community (France), says:

"At the root of ecological, economic, societal and human crises is a cognitive crisis, a crisis of consciousness that has its origin in the cognitive grasping that has generated it.

The problem is that we have exiled ourselves from nature, from our nature, into a world of representation, containing nothing but mental concepts, a bubble of mental consciousness that cuts us off from nature, the nature that we are. Our overwhelming reliance on mental representations in our daily existence makes us live in a closed virtual world. This enlarged and overwhelming conceptual realm in our mind goes hand in hand with the enlargement of our ego: the more cognitive grasping, the greater is the ego. We suffer in some way from an **"acute egotic flu"** whose manifestations



appear in our society's individualism and our selfish materialism".

In this regard, Edgar Morin, the great French humanist and philosopher, early resistance fighter in 1940, who will celebrate his centenary this year, denounces this cognitive crisis in what he calls a "crisis of thought." He tells us in essence:

"The crisis arising from the Coronavirus is a virulent symptom of a deeper and general crisis of the paradigm of the West that has become global, that of modernity, born in the European sixteenth century... The deficiencies of the thought, the enormous black hole in our

mind, makes us disjoin what is inseparable and reduce to a single element what forms a whole at the same time one and multiple; it separates and compartmentalizes the knowledge instead of connecting them. The deficiencies in the way of thinking joined to the domination of an unbridled thirst of profit, are responsible for innumerable human disasters, of which those occurred in 2020...

The awareness of the community of terrestrial destiny between the living Nature and the human adventure must become a major event of our time: we must feel solidarity with this planet where our life is linked to its existence; we must not only manage it but

also spare it: we must recognize our biological filiation and our ontological filiation; it is the umbilical cord that we must renew".

The Trojan horse

Universal wisdom tells us that in nature, death is not the opposite of life, **life is birth and death**. The Coronavirus could be the Trojan horse of nature that enters the almost hermetic mental bubble in which humanity seems to have locked itself. Will the small breach be salutary?

In short, facing what the United Nations already stigmatizes as an **"existential threat"**, the virus may be the trigger for a revolution, an inner revolution



based on an axiological metamorphosis of values. This is the only viable future, the virus whispers in our ears. It is a question of drawing again from the origins of Knowledge and Ethics, for the Renaissance of a spiritual and ecological humanism, regenerated in nature and in our nature.

Oases of life

We can trust the resources of our heart and mind to cross fears and act altruistically and ecologically, right where we are. It's about starting with ourselves, in our bodies, our hearts and our minds. Inwardly we can meditate a little more and practice **mindfulness**. Externally, we can implement this nonviolent revolution locally in the countryside and villages, by creating **oases of life**.

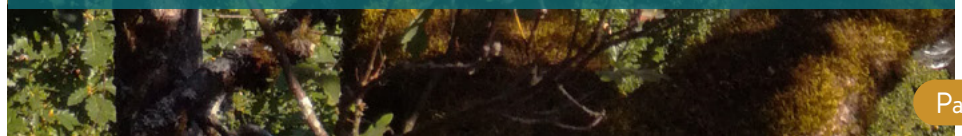
There is in France a growing development of these kinds of collective projects inspired by the extensive "[Colibris network](#)" founded by the renowned pioneer in ecology [Pierre Rabhi](#), and coordinated by "[La Cooperative Oasis](#)". The [Buddha University](#) and its "yogic village" in the French Alps is part of it.

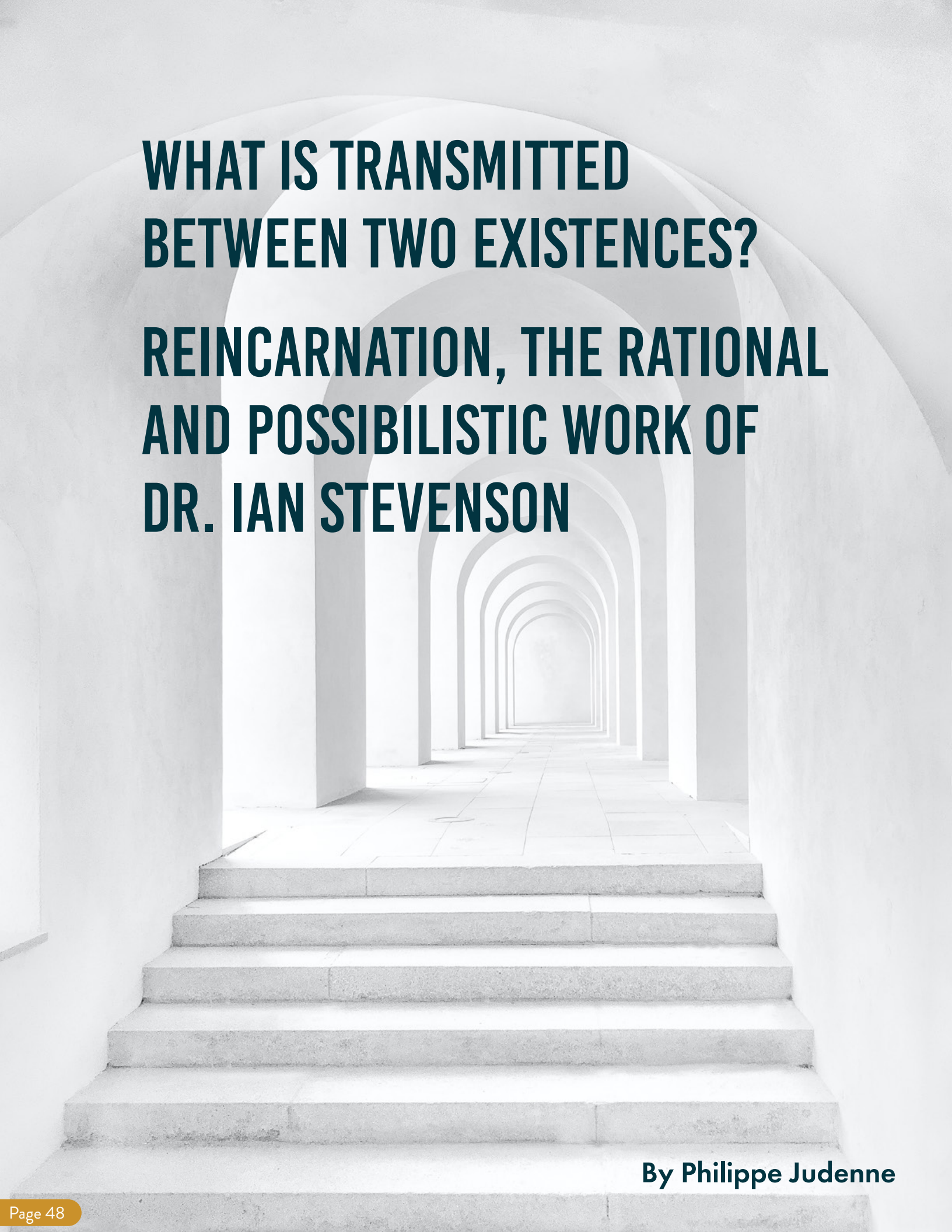
Let us be united and daring, let us contaminate ourselves with an irrepressible pandemic of intelligence and love, and let oases of life flourish! ☯



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All pictures in this article are from Frédéric La Combe (L. Lhündrup).





**WHAT IS TRANSMITTED
BETWEEN TWO EXISTENCES?**

**REINCARNATION, THE RATIONAL
AND POSSIBILISTIC WORK OF
DR. IAN STEVENSON**

By Philippe Judenne

What is transmitted to a being that takes birth? For the sciences, the individual is the fruit of his or her genetic heritage and family experience, or purely the product of interactions with the environment. Where the sciences debate the part between the innate and the acquired from the zero point of conception or birth of a living being, Buddhist spirituality considers that only the law of causality of karma is at work and makes successive rebirths manifest: it recognizes an innate character to each newborn, fruit of a previous karma, and an acquired character which is built as new actions, new karmic acts at the level of the body, the word and the spirit of an individual advancing in the life. It does not consider that there is a zero point of the beginning of the existence of a current of consciousness, which is remanifested differently in successive existences and in

different spheres of existence. At the moment of death, the stream of consciousness, which was created by the separation from the body, no longer has the limits of the physical body, and it is the "wind of karma" that will determine its rebirth. How then does karmic energy manifest itself from one existence to another? Or, if we rephrase the question more simply out of a Buddhist frame of reference, how would be defined what is transmitted to a human being who takes birth?

Dr. Ian Stevenson was Professor of Psychiatry and Director of DOPS from 1967 to 2002 at the University of Virginia, USA. Over the years, he studied and corroborated thousands of children's accounts of memories of an existence chronologically prior to their birth. These young children demonstrated memories, skills, behaviors and knowledge that could not be expected of a child their age in their usual environment. Questions arose first in the family, which could then sometimes take them outside the family circle.

Traumatic memories. Ian Stevenson and his teams studied and investigated in Asia, the Middle East and America, and in 1979, they succeeded in listing nearly 600 cases "suggesting reincarnation". Stevenson's work challenged

established scientific theories, such as genetic or behavioral determinism. Thus, he cautiously called his most convincing cases "cases suggesting reincarnation", which emerged from rigorous investigations carried out in the field.

Some of the memories were traumatic and perhaps linked to phobias observed in young children whose bodies could have scars or marks of unknown origin. It was with a view to treating these childhood phobias that Ian Stevenson first became interested in the children's stories and their astonishing accuracy. "One of the cases was that of a little girl in Sri Lanka who showed both a great aversion to water and an intense fright at the sight of buses. As soon as she could speak, she told of how, in another situation, she had backed away hastily from a passing bus, fallen into a flooded field, and drowned."

A death that is not very peaceful, like the one told by children who are phobic about a type of weapon, the very one that their stories, their memories designate each time as the weapon of the murder experienced at that moment. For it is indeed a question of memories, but not those of the children. Jim B. Tucker, who took up the work of Ian Stevenson in 2002 and who is very involved in the DOPS at the University of Virginia, reports

that "in about 70% of the cases of American children who claim to remember past lives, the deceased died of an unnatural cause, which suggests that traumatic death may be linked to the supposed survival of a self". The strength of the memory, of the reminiscence, seems to be very much linked to that of the emotion experienced at the moment of death in violent cases, which in no way presumes the survival of a "self", refuted by the Buddhist tradition.



An exceptional wealth of memories

Other cases of exceptional richness of memories have been verified and corroborated by the university researcher. In his interview with Ian Stevenson in 1979, Joël André reports that an exceptional case, the most fascinating of them all according to Dr Stevenson, was that of a little Lebanese boy, Imad Elawar. Born in 1958, Imad claimed at the age of three to have lived in another village and described in great detail the places and people he had known there. He recounted various significant episodes of this previous life (accidents, fights, hunting, etc.), spoke of "his" house and the places in it where various objects were located, and nostalgically evoked his friends and the beautiful young woman with whom he had lived. Out of sixty indications provided by Imad, fifty-seven proved to be strictly accurate. The great strength of this case, explains Joël André, is that Prof. Stevenson knew about it before the meeting between Imad's family and the family of the deceased, that the latter claimed to be a certain Ibrahim Bouhamy, who died of tuberculosis in 1949. Professor Stevenson was thus able to list all of Imad's claims before taking him to the village mentioned by the child, for a verification that was thus carried out from beginning to end by Stevenson himself.

Remarkable emotional attitudes

Joël André asked Ian Stevenson this question: "At this stage of a case, what are the most convincing facts? And, more generally, on what do you base your personal intuition of the authenticity of a case?"

Ian Stevenson: "I could, of course, cite the extraordinary abundance of subsequently verified information, but that in itself does not justify the reincarnation hypothesis alone. On the other hand, certain emotional attitudes seem to me to be remarkable, especially in countries like India where the smallest family and neighborhood relationships are closely codified. That the child recognizes correctly the persons who are presented to him, that he gives their exact names, is a first thing. But when he avoids the false recognitions offered to him, when he behaves towards each member of his previous family in perfect accord with the attitude of son, husband or wife that he is supposed to have been in that family, the likelihood of reincarnation increases. A five-year-old child, Sukla, was

thus able to behave towards the one she recognized as her daughter Minu, who had grown up in the meantime, with an emotional spontaneity and maternal authority that were quite remarkable. She could address men thirty or forty years older than her as if she were still the housewife she claimed to have been. And, an important detail for those who know the psychology of Indian homes, she ate from the same plate as "her" husband of a previous life, something no Indian woman would do in relation to another family member or a stranger."

According to Stevenson, it is difficult to say that one is dealing with a single personality in the child. Rather, he spoke of a continuity or juxtaposition of two personalities. At a certain moment, the child assumes an adult position, linked to a previous life. If he remembers being a banker, for example, he talks about "his" money, "his" accounts, "his" business, etc. The next moment he is playing a game with his friends. The next moment he is playing like any other child of his age. But he can "go back to being a banker" at any time, especially when an element of the present context reminds him of the one in which he says he lived. There are therefore coexisting personalities, but the one from

the previous life is as consistent as the current one.

Unlearned abilities

Professor Stevenson relates the case of a Brazilian child, Paulo, who claimed to be the reincarnation of Emilia, a young girl who had died 16 months earlier. Emilia had shown a real genius for sewing and embroidery. The young Paulo seemed to perpetuate the essence of it. His older sister remembers that Paulo had a gift for sewing from an early age. One day when a maid was clumsily trying to use a sewing machine, Paulo pushed her aside and showed her how it should be done. He was four years old when another of his sisters had trouble with the sewing machine's spool. Again, Paulo solved the problem.

Another sister had left an embroidery on the machine to be finished: in her absence, Paulo finished the work without any help. The whole family agreed that the child knew how to use the machine "before he learned". When asked to explain this amazing ability, he replied, "I knew how to sew before." When they wanted to encourage him by offering him sewing lessons, he replied, "I already know."

Even more technical seems to be the performance of an Indian child, Parmod, who claimed the personality of a deceased merchant named Paramand. Parmod cited a host of accurate details about the deceased's life and spoke with ease about Paramand's possessions (store, cinema, hotel) as if he had managed them himself. On his first visit to "his old store", he immediately asked, "Who's running the bakery and the soda factory?" (These were the two main activities of the late Paramand.) Brought in front of the soda machine, Parmod explained exactly how it worked. He was then asked to start it up. The water supply had been cut off without his knowledge to embarrass him. Parmod understood, however,

without any help, how this machine (very complicated according to Prof. Stevenson) had to be started again.

Transmigration

For years, Ian Stevenson has carefully controlled his accounts and exposed his methods of investigation. The very serious Journal of the American Medical Association or JAMA, an international peer-reviewed medical journal, concluded as early as 1975: "On the subject of reincarnation, Stevenson has carefully and unbiasedly compiled a series of detailed cases. The facts reported can hardly be explained by any other hypothesis than that of reincarnation."

In forty years, the avenues opened up by Ian Stevenson have made it possible to broaden the current paradigm by founding the hypothesis that consciousness is something greater than a physically produced phenomenon, a hypothesis that is more precise and effective than the dominant materialist view. Memories, emotional attitudes and abilities can be remanifested from one existence to another, Stevenson's work documents and largely answers this question. Stevenson's follow-up of children shows that as they age, children's "before" memories fade into memories of memories, compared to the much more vivid and current memories of their present lives. ◎





Founded in 1967 by Dr. Ian Stevenson, the Division of Perceptual Studies (DOPS) is the world's oldest and most productive academic research group devoted exclusively to the study of phenomena that challenge the current physical orthodoxy regarding the brain and mind, including phenomena directly suggesting the postmortem survival of consciousness.

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