

No regrets Advice for living and dying

His Holiness the Dalai Lama accepted the invitation of Karuna Hospice to visit Karuna House on June 13, 2007. He first met with the Board and staff to hear about the work Karuna does and accepted the Board's invitation to be the Spiritual Patron of Karuna. After lunch which was prepared and served by Karuna's volunteers, His Holiness met privately with the Governor of Queensland and then went out into the front garden to speak to over 800 people including client families, health professionals, religious leaders and Karuna's staff and volunteers.

The following is a lightly edited transcript of His Holiness's talk.

The Governor, Buddhist sister, Tibetan Buddhist sister, other guests, brothers and sisters.

Firstly, I want to express my deep appreciation for what you are doing here. For many years I have heard about the kind of activities carried out by some of the members of Lama Zopa Rinpoche's organisation, and today I actually have the opportunity to visit your place and meet some of your staff members and volunteers, as well as some of the clients/patients. So I am extremely happy.

Whatever has a beginning has an end

It is human nature for there to be a beginning and an end. But not only we human beings, also the mountains and oceans. Even though they seem more or less permanent, even for these things there is a beginning and there is an end. Whole galaxies also, there is a beginning and there is an end. It is quite natural. Any phenomenon which has a beginning must have an end.

The plants and mountains, rocks, oceans, galaxies, stars, however, have no cognitive capacity and, except for chemical reactions, no feeling, therefore no pain, no pleasure, no joyfulness. But sentient beings, living things with life, they have this cognitive capacity with which they experience feelings.

When other living things come to end, this is just the end. However, among those who have feelings, the animals may have strong feelings in the moment, some pain and pleasure, but we human beings, because of our intelligence, our memory and our capacity for vision into the future, we have much greater feelings.

It's not enough to just take care of the body

As we pass through our life and eventually reach old age, we often experience some serious illnesses that come nearer the end, terminal illnesses. And because of our intelligence, memory, etc., as I mentioned, we usually face additional psychological problems

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or emotional problems. Therefore, it is not sufficient just to take care of the body; we need more.

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition there is a saying: towards the end of their life the top practitioner is actually happy because now there is the opportunity to take a new young body, and in some cases some other better planet, the celestial realms, where there's less trouble, including so-called heaven, places like that.

For the middle level practitioner, there is no reluctance towards the end of the life; they are ready, they are prepared; there is no sort of reluctance. And for the least practitioner, there is neither joyfulness, happiness regarding death nor regret. They think: "In my life I have no regrets. While I was alive I did my best and now the time has come – no regrets." I think this is more or less the practical attitude, realistic attitude. It is part of life, as I mentioned earlier: where there is a beginning, the end logically comes.

So, from the Buddhist viewpoint, for the human being it is so fortunate to have helpers at the end, people who are really taking care. Even at the moment of dying we can still utilise our intelligence to cultivate some positive state of mind, such as altruism.

In my own case, my daily practice consists of difference practices that are preparation for death – but I am not really sure whether I can materialise this practice, this preparation, satisfactorily or not! I don't know. Sometimes I have a little bit of doubt! But one thing is quite sure, at the time of death I will remember, still be thinking about altruism. Our future life should be something meaningful, something useful to others. That is the Buddhist practitioner's way of thinking.

Anyway, at the time of the end we really need counselling, I think is very, very useful. We need to take care of our emotions or our sadness – not only the dying person himself or herself, but also his or her close friends. It is very useful. And in the meantime I am in no doubt, it is a difficult job.

I visited some hospitals in Japan where people are looking after children with deformities. Really, it is very, very sad, and I really admire those people who are working, taking care of them – something like hopeless patients, with very disturbed minds. Taking care of them is not easy. So I want give special thanks to those people who are involved in such a difficult task.

I think this is a service without expectation of reward. This is real service. Otherwise, through calculation, if I have this much and what I will get – that is something like trade. But these services are really selfless service. Really great!

How to help non-believers at the time of death

So, how to deal with the person facing death, the end? Of course, I am not an expert, I am just someone who really admires such work and realises it is really important and necessary; the last opportunity of service to others, the last opportunity for the

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implementation of love and compassion. That much I know.

So how to deal with it? Of course, it is better to research some other experts; you may gain more efficient methods. My knowledge is really limited, but generally speaking, I think there are a variety of people to help with that process at the end.

Firstly, the non-believer: At the time of the end, I think more or less everyone has the same feeling: sort of feeling of “I”. Everybody, whether practitioner or not, believer or non-believer, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, high ranking or lower people, from the President, King or Emperor to the dog, the beggar – we all feel the same at that moment: a feeling of “I”. The same.

So, because of that there is a very strong feeling, “Now I am no longer”. Every sentient being experiences that at that time. Because of the feeling of “self”, the feeling of “I”, “Now I am no longer”, there is sometimes fear, sometimes fear, sometimes a very shocking helplessness.

For a non-believer, I think at that moment it’s difficult to help. However, I think in daily life, or before that actually happens, it is important to accept that, sooner or later, death will come.

When I am passing through big cities and I visit cemeteries I tell my companions, “This is our final destination – not a big house, but this is our real, final destination!” So, better to accept it. Sooner or later death will come; it is part of our life. Then when death is about to approach, we accept it as part of our life, as part of nature: “It now comes nearer to me.” OK. I think that’s better.

Some people avoid the word “death”

Sometimes I notice that some people even try to avoid the very word “death”. That’s quite silly. Unrealistic. It’s better to talk about it, better to accept it. That’s the reality. I think, like with any other activities, we should be realistic, whether it is good or bad. Accept that. No use for pretension, no use of formality. When death comes there is no formality. It just comes! No formality – it just comes [much laughter from His Holiness]. Also with birth, no formality, it just comes!

In Tibet, I have friends who are very much concerned with astrology. Basically, I have no faith in astrology, so I joke, teasing some of these people who are very much concerned with astrology, telling them that in our lifetime, two things are most important: the beginning and the end, birth and death. You cannot go according to astrology – birth comes, death comes. We cannot say, “Oh this is a bad day according to astrology so I will not die!” It is beyond our control. So then in between these two what happens is comparatively minor, not important. According to astrology, a “bad day” doesn’t matter – go ahead! So that is my view. [More laughter.]

It is important to accept that and to pursue a more realistic way.

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I think that attitude helps to reduce additional mental projections anxiety, sorrow or fear.

The best time to prepare for death is during life

I think the best method to avoid fear or regret at the time of death is while we are alive. We must utilise our time, our energy, in a meaningful way. Serving others, for example; I think that is the most profound way, the meaning of usefulness.

Taking care of one's own survival – even animals can do that. But service to others is something unique to human beings. Even animals have the bond between the mother and child, or offspring, for a short period, that kind of close feeling. But we human beings, because of our intelligence, we can prolong that kind of feeling for the whole of our life, extended throughout our life. So, serving other people, helping other people is, I think, is a very, very appropriate action according to our intelligence, our human ability. We have such ability. We can utilise that ability in the most appropriate way by serving other people. Then at the end you will feel no regret. "I've done my best – a useful, meaningful life. Now the end comes." Although sorry or sad, but no regrets. For the believer or the non-believer, for everybody, I think it's the same thing.

How to help believers at the time of death

There are two categories of believers, generally speaking: theistic religions and non-theistic religions.

For those of the theistic religions, I think it is very useful to think about God being the creator. This very life was created by God, so therefore the end is also according to God's plan. Although death looks unfortunate, very sad, doesn't seem justified, but there must be some meaning which we may not understand. God plans it, therefore there must be some meaning, some positive meaning. Thinking along those lines is helpful.

Then non-theistic religions, such as Buddhism, believe everything happens due to the law of causality. A happy event or a sad event, including incurable illness or old age or death – they are all due to causal conditions.

The theory of rebirth

And from the viewpoint of some of these non-theistic religions, they accept the rebirth theory, that there is the continuation of mind, continuation of subtle mind and energy; we believe in a previous life and a future life. Past lives are limitless and future lives also. Until ignorance is eliminated, life will continue. Therefore, from that viewpoint death is something like changing our clothes when they are of no more use. When clothes become old, useless; when the time comes – change! New clothes – perhaps, more expensive!

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The death process

Also, another angle. Death sometimes means deep sleep. This consciousness at a certain level is the waking state, then it goes down to the dream state. Go down further, then deep sleep. Go down further: faint. Go down further: death. At the time of death it is the subtlest level of mind. Then again, the process goes in reverse order. Life circles like that: our consciousness reaches a certain level and [gets subtler and subtler] and again comes back; it happens like that.

Death means the time of changing our body, but the mind continues, it's still there. On that continuation of the mind is designated "the self"; it is the basis of the designation "self". There is no independent self.

So, for the dying person who knows these things, who believes or accepts these philosophical concepts, actually that moment is the best opportunity to examine the different stages of dissolution of our physical components. I asked some of my friends who are practitioners, two or three of them, when they were passing through surgery, during anaesthesia, "Did you find some kind of the indication of these different stages of dissolution?" They said no. So, I don't know! Maybe due to the pills, the smell, maybe the reaction happens very quickly, so they could not recognise the signs that accompany the different stages of dissolution that occur at death.

So anyway, in conclusion, for the non-believer, better to accept this is part of reality, part of our life, that sooner or later it will come. Then among the believers who believe in God, total faith, belief in God, is useful at that moment. And then those of a non-theistic religion, thinking about the rebirth theory is useful.

How to help those who are left behind

Then for those family members who are remaining, left behind, usually I share this with these people.

At the time that my mother died, and particularly the death of my teacher, at that time of course I felt very sad. But I made up my mind, I decided that if I remain with too much sadness, somehow my teacher or my mother would know about my mental state, and they would feel much worry.

Of course, the death of one of your closest friends is very sad. But still you can remain normal, composed, and carry your life in the usual way, doing your service for others, living your meaningful life; you can carry on your life even more rigorously. Then your loved one may feel, "OK, I am no more there, but my friend still carries on continuously, full of strength, full of enthusiasm." If there is a way to know, your loved one will feel much happier.

Also, already the person has died, but if the remaining people worry too much, you become desperate and it can even lead to nervous breakdowns; this is just additional worry. So can think along those lines.

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Sometimes there are unacceptable tragedies. Of course it's sad, but it's already happened. So much worry does not help the person to return; you can't revive the person. Too much worry simply ruins your own health, your own peace of mind. That is actually an additional tragedy. You yourself then are involved in additional suffering or problems.

I also usually experience it that way. And I tell that to my friends or the people who come to see me who are facing some tragedy; usually I give that kind of suggestion.

Thank you

So, finally, thank you. You invited me here – and also you arranged a helicopter. Very, very easy to come here! The other day in the helicopter, it was raining; physically it was very pleasant, but mentally there was a little bit of worry because of the rain! But today, physically very comfortable and mentally also.

Thank you, thank you, thank you very much.

**Karuna also has experienced people you can talk with on:
07 3632 8300 or karuna@karuna.org.au**



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