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"DEATH IS A SACRAMENT".

This text addresses some of the most fundamental and delicate religious issues. Therefore, it should be read, quoted and analysed in a mindful way.

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Enquiries: The Editor, "Mind Moon Circle", Sydney Zen Centre, 251 Young St., Annandale, Sydney, NSW 2038, Australia. Tel: + 61 2 6602993

Death is a Sacrament
SUBHANA Barzaghi Sensei

Subhana's talk, dedicated to the memory of Father Bede Griffiths, was given at Spring Sesshin 1993, Gorricks Run Zendo.

Immediately we start to speak about death in our culture, it conjures up all kinds of images of something morbid or depressing or tragic or painful, Our Western culture is particularly good at hiding death and making it something alien. We immediately cover up a corpse and lock it behind closed doors, cover it over with a sterile sheet, in some ways denying death's relevance to life. There is such a great fear of extinction that we treat death as something taboo. We live with this anxiety about death, as if it is a denial of our rights to continual and perpetual self-determination.

My first early experience around death was certainly not a pleasant one. I was working as a nurse at the Lorna Hodgkinson Sunshine Home in Sydney. I normally looked after children Ñ a ward of twenty-eight unruly mentally retarded boys Ñ but on one occasion I was transferred to the geriatric ward and I was rostered to a mentally retarded patient there who was dying. I think I was rostered because nobody else wanted to take care of him. When I went in there he could barely speak and state his needs. The smell was repulsive: everything came out in the bed; there was excretion everywhere. I did not know how to relate to this situation at all: I was twenty-one. As the days went on he became worse and he died. I felt that this was a very tragic and repulsive way to die because I had no way of meeting this person's needs or even communicating with him. I felt totally inadequate. I went straight to the matron's office and said, 'If you don't transfer me back to the children's ward, you're going to have one less nurse on Monday morning.' In those days, I don't

think we were prepared for death or how to deal with it Ñ I certainly wasn't prepared, in any way.

Many years later I had another experience, completely different from that. When I was a midwife for seven years, delivering babies at home, on one occasion I was assisting some dear friends. The labour was not progressing well and was showing obvious signs that the woman and the labour needed attention. So we transferred her to the hospital. During the pushing stage one could tell that there was something not quite right. The pushing stage was very, very difficult for her, unlike other situations that I had been in, so we picked up on something on an energetic level. When they tried to find the baby's heartbeat on the monitor, there was no heartbeat. That is not uncommon at that stage of labour: when the baby is so far down in the birth canal, one cannot always pick up the heartbeat. Nevertheless the doctor also somehow felt that he must get this baby out. When the baby was born, it was dead.

The father, who had done a lot of work on himself, was a very interesting person, very spontaneous. He just let out an almighty scream that went right through the hospital. The nurse burst into tears and ran out of the room. The doctor cleaned up and didn't know what to say. So there we were. I was with this couple and this dead baby. What we decided to do was just walk right out of the hospital. We took the baby with us. Nobody was going to stop us Ñ they didn't know how to respond anyway. We got into their van and drove off someplace in the middle of the night and we all sat there in the van and passed round the dead baby and started singing to the baby and speaking to the baby. Of course there was a huge amount of tears and enormous grief, but I was also amazed, in looking at this baby's face, at how exquisitely peaceful it was. So I had the most extreme emotions of incredible peace and at the same time extraordinary grief. I could not sleep for three days; it was a very strange experience, a very beautiful experience as well.

These early experiences led me to question, what is death? When the body dies, what remains? This is an important question, and we take it up more fully in our miscellaneous koans. The koan is, "When you separate into earth, water, fire, and air, where do you go?" Zen training and any truly deep religious experience should answer these questions of life and death, or at least put to rest some of our fear. There are some parallels between deep sleep and death. Each night when we lie down to sleep we enter into our dream world, our consciousness and our senses begin to fade, and the world disappears; all the dramas and pleasures and successes and failures dissolve into the silence. Our attitude to sleep is to welcome deep sleep: it is a relief, it alleviates some of the stresses of the day. Yet we view death with such fear and anxiety.

The apparent division between birth and death is not so total as we imagine. The question is, who dies? What dies? In our practice there is the small death of the body, and we may die a hundred deaths without touching the great death of the mind. This great death of the mind is very important. The death of the mind gives birth to wisdom, and this wisdom is timeless, boundless state, right here and now, where there is no self to take refuge in. When we ask the question, who am I? or what am I? it is the I

that is not known. What you are you must find out. In some ways, we can only describe what you are not. You are not the world; you are not even in the world. It is more like the world is in you. In Zen we call this experience, 'I alone and sacred in the whole universe.' Another way of saying that is, 'Buddha-nature pervades the whole universe.' There is no separation there, and when we say, 'I alone and sacred in the whole universe,' we do not mean this self-important, self-conscious little 'I.'

So death serves the deepest interests of a religious life, by reminding us of the emptiness of desires and plans and achievements and self-interest. It keeps us in check in some way. All of our competitiveness seems madness when we cannot take anything with us. Our spiritual maturity and freedom lies in our readiness to let go of our self-importance.

When I was in Los Angeles, maybe six years ago, I was given tickets to a really interesting play. It was called 'AIDS Us.' It was a play like no other play that I have ever been to. There was a very small auditorium and there was no barrier between the actors and the people in the audience, no separation. All the people on stage had AIDS and they just got up and talked about their lives, how extraordinarily different their lives had been since they got AIDS. And instead of 'dying with AIDS' they reframed it and thought of themselves as 'living with AIDS.' It was quite an extraordinarily empowering experience for these people and the people in the audience. There wasn't a dry eye in the house. And this was in the early days, when there was a lot of paranoia and misunderstanding about AIDS. At the end of the play everybody from the audience just walked right down and everybody hugged and greeted everybody else. There was a total breakdown of fear; there was no sense of alienation; everybody was hugging everybody else. And that was a fairly straight audience, and back in those days that was quite an amazing experience for me. It was certainly my first contact with anyone who had AIDS, and particularly a whole stageful of people. They later took that play to the White House to raise money for people who had AIDS.

There is interesting research now available about people's near-death experiences. The chair of the Department of Parapsychology at Bristol University has done interviews with people who had near-death experiences. She explored them from a range of approaches, from the medical to the religious. The biological-medical argument is that the reason people consistently see a great light at the end of a tunnel is because the brain is being starved of oxygen, and therefore everything goes dark; people thus experience something like going through a tunnel and coming out to the light on the other side. This argument can explain why there is a tunnel, but it cannot explain why there is a light at the other end. They haven't got an answer for that one! The researcher Ñ and she was taking a straight scientific approach Ñ said that maybe Buddhism had some answers there, the best answers. Because Buddhism says that the self is merely a construct and that we re-create the self over and over and over again, moment by moment. And at the time of death the physical construct of the self starts to fall away: body and mind falling away, that moment. And we can witness the great light, we can witness the emptiness. And this also accounts for people's consistent experiences of the interconnected oneness with all

things in those near-death experiences.

There is a range of beliefs about death that we may have subscribed to at some point. The scientific view is that we live once; we die once; death is total extinction. This of course is very rational, and there is no proof to support any other view, nothing else is available. The Christian view is that there is life after death; for those who find God, the kingdom of heaven is open for eternity; for those who reject God, there is hell for eternity; the earth is but a brief home, a testing ground for our love of God.

A Buddhist view of death is that we are all waves on the ocean; each wave is born and dies repeatedly, according to our underlying forces; there is rebirth until enlightenment, until we get off the wheel of samsara. A variation of that is that there is reincarnation, until the dissolution of the ego, when the soul becomes one with the absolute. I am still not sure about any of those beliefs.

Years ago, when I was at Kopan monastery, at the age of nineteen, I did my very first meditation retreat. I was naive enough to sign up for a thirty-day retreat. Kopan monastery is just outside Kathmandu in Nepal, and the lamas there, Lama Zopa and Lama Yeshe, were wonderful teachers. For all beginning students they used to make us meditate on death for two weeks. Then, if that was not enough, we would have to meditate on the hell realms for two weeks. We started out on that retreat with 150 people and about thirty of us finished. They were always saying, 'The reason we get people to meditate on death is because it motivates people to practise.' I'm not sure about that! But, twenty years later, I have come around to thinking that the lamas had something that was important there: they weren't so eccentric and crazy as I originally thought.

Tibetan Buddhism focuses a lot on understanding the process of death and dying. The lamas used to say that the moment of death is potent with opportunity, because it is then that we have access to the fundamental nature of mind. This luminous clear light will manifest; it will naturally manifest. This is a crucial point, because it is also at that point that we can attain liberation. However, we usually do not recognise it, because we are not acquainted with it, here and now in our practice, in our daily lives. So they emphasise that it is right now in our practice, in this lifetime, that we must encounter that unmanifested great mind, establish that essential recognition here and now.

Just after that thirty-day retreat, I was getting on a plane to leave Kathmandu to go back to India. I had always had a childhood fear that I was going to die young: I carried that fear with me almost every day. I know some of you here also have that fear. That morning I woke up and I thought, 'Well, I'm going to die.' Instead of saying to myself, as I would usually say, 'Oh Subhana, don't be so paranoid, so depressive,' after meditating on death for two weeks up in Kopan monastery, I thought, 'Well, OK, I'll just go with it.' So I decided that every single thing I did that day should be complete in itself. Every movement Ñ lifting the arm, bringing it back Ñ was complete; there was death in that moment. Drinking my tea: that was the last moment I was going to

drink a cup of tea. Eating my toast: that was the last time. So there was an incredible preciousness about each and every thing. And it took an incredibly long time to pack my bag Ñ I thought maybe I was stalling too, about getting on that plane.

Eventually in the afternoon I got on the plane: it took me all day to get there. We were in a light aircraft, going through a turbulent cloud formation out of Kathmandu; the little plane was bouncing all over the place. I thought, 'This is just like my life: being in one endless turbulent cloud formation, bouncing up and down all over the place.' Then in the next moment the plane came through into an open blue sky, very clear; you could see the patchwork fields of India below. And although it was not an awakening experience, it gave me hope and inspiration. It gave me a glimpse that maybe there is something that does not die, that cannot be destroyed, and every now and then we get a glimpse of it. That there is something greater that contains all this.

Another reason the Tibetan lamas would say why it was so important to meditate on death and the hell realms was because it gave a story, an explanation, about the six realms of existence. These are the Tushita heaven or heavenly realms; the demigods; the human realms; the animal realms; the hungry ghosts, or demons and spirits, or Preta realms; and the hell realms. The lamas would say that it was so precious to be born in the human realm. If you are in the hell realms there is so much pain and suffering that one can only survive; all one can do is cope with the pain. So in the hell realms there is no spirit of inquiry for realisation, to attain the Way. The same with the other extreme of the heavenly, blissful realm. It is so blissful, so pleasant, we are having such a good time being blissed out, that there is no inquiry in that realm either. The human realm was always considered the middle path, the middle realm, where there is a balance of pleasure and pain. It enables us to explore more deeply into the meaning of life. You can think of 'realms'; sometimes I find it more helpful to think of them as states of mind rather than realms. We can go through those states of mind even in one day, here in sesshin. If we translate the realms to the now, this middle realm is a balance of pleasure and pain: don't get stuck in heaven! That is not the Way. Some equanimity is the middle ground, is the perfect ripe place for awakening the mind.

When we think of birth and death we encounter the concept of karma. I was recently reading 'The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying', by Sogyal Rinpoche. He gives a lovely metaphor about karma and rebirth that I thought I would like to share with you. I always stayed right away from the concept of karma. Somehow I could never get my head around it, how to put it all together. Sogyal illustrates it in the following example.

The successive existences in a series of rebirths are not like the pearls of a pearl necklace, where they are held together on a thread all the way through, like a permanent soul. It is not like that, he says: it is more like a series of dice or blocks, all piled one on top of the other, one supporting the other. There is no identity between each block, but they are functionally connected. One functionally supports the other. It is more like that than it is like a permanent self or permanent soul running through all existences. There is only conditionality between the

blocks.

If we apply that understanding right now, to this very moment, right now, we have a whole series of mind-moments, a whole series of consciousnesses. There is seeing, there is hearing, there is thinking, there is feeling. There are just these moments of consciousness, functionally connected. We just sit with that awareness, that empty awareness. There is no permanent self that threads itself through all that. We just hear it arising and passing away, each moment, right here. When we stay with that series of mind-moments Ñ and they happen so fast; the mind is happening at an incredible pace, seeing, hearing, thinking, feeling - we notice the impermanence. We are very aware of the constant flux and change. Impermanence has many gifts, but its greatest gift lies buried deep inside. The fear of impermanence that awakens in us, the fear that nothing is real, that nothing lasts, is in fact a great friend. Because it drives us to ask the question, If everything dies and changes, what is truth? Is there something beyond the impermanent appearances of life? Is there something that survives all the deaths of the world, all the many changes? There are vast implications in this fundamental fact of impermanence. When we truly see into impermanence, we can see into the empty nature of things and we can also see that it is not-self. These three faces of the truth Ñ impermanence, emptiness, and not-self Ñ are right there in each moment.

Many times a friend dying can also give us a glimpse of this timeless, boundless reality. There is such an energy around birth; there is also a wonderful energy around death, around someone dying. It can awaken something in us. When someone is dying, everyone around that person has an opportunity to be touched by that life-death-life nature. It is a very precious opportunity. Life and death are not opposing enemies, but are complementary within the totality. When we are in touch with that we are touching this death-less, this change-less, that brings deep peace. But most of the time we do not bother to be conscious of our mortality and the cessation of all that we have known or lived for or loved or worked for. None of us can say how we will relate to our impending death. But if we live more conscious of death, right now, in each moment, we might greet the dawn and the bird and the stars at night with a lot more presence and immediacy. Life is nothing but a perpetual fluctuation of birth, death, rebirth. Death exposes itself each moment. Even in a single thought there is a beginning, middle, and end of the thought. There is a beginning, middle, and end of a breath. There is the sound of the bird that returns to the silence. So this moment is birth, this moment is death. This moment is rebirth, this moment is deathless. Can we embrace it like that?

A book that everybody seems to be reading at the moment, 'Women who Run with the Wolves', by Clarissa Pincola Estes, has a description of Skeleton Woman. She says that if we embody the old wise woman she welcomes death to her heart, death to her fire. She knows death as life-giver, as death-dealer. And women unconsciously practise these cycles of birth, death, and renewal every month, through the constant cycles of the filling and emptying of our life blood: every moon cycle. The cycles of Skeleton Woman flow deep through our bodies, throughout our entire life. This is indeed a series of births and deaths. But if we hold on to life with fear of death, of losing our car, our

house, our friends, our children, this fear creates something like dead fingernails in the mind. The essential life and love can never leave you because you are that.. And when we awake we hold to nothing. It is neither conscious nor unconscious. It is that pure heart of awareness. It is that true nakedness beyond all appearance. Everything exists in its light. The essence of awareness neither dies nor is reborn. It is this changeless reality. And life and death then are married in the emptiness. In the Hekiganroku, Case 3, 'Great Master Baso is unwell,' this master is dying and the head monk asks him, 'How is your reverence feeling these days?' And the great master says, 'Sun-faced Buddha, moon-faced Buddha.' What did he mean? 'Sun-faced Buddha, moon-faced Buddha.' This man is dying. Whether he is sick or well, the master is at peace. In other words, he sees all experience as Buddha-nature.

When I was in San Francisco a couple of years ago I had a wonderful opportunity. I was visiting John Tarrant Roshi and staying with Governor Jerry Brown, an ex-Jesuit. One night he said, 'There is a remarkable man over at Berkeley: why don't we go and meet him?' The man's name was Father Bede Griffith: some of you may have met him or know of him. He was a Christian priest who lived in India for something like thirty years, and who seemed to be able to assimilate all kinds of practices in his ashram. When they were chanting, one minute it was Buddhist chanting, the next minute Hindu, the next minute Christian. He would include all of these things. We went to the No Gate Zen Centre in Berkeley. There was a small Zen sesshin happening downstairs, with a Zen teacher giving a talk. We trudged upstairs to meet Father Bede Griffith. When we walked in, he was sitting on his bed. He was quite old and not very well and could not walk easily. He was dressed in his orange loincloth, which he wears all the time. He was a wonderful little old man, with silvery hair and a long white beard. Jerry happened to ask him a really interesting question. He said, 'What is death?' And Father Bede Griffith all of a sudden became excited and brighteyed and filled with joy and enthusiasm, and said, 'Death is a sacrament. I am completely looking forward to my death.' I was sitting right next to him on the bed and I was stunned. I never met anyone with such an enthusiasm for death, and such joy and love for death. 'I am completely looking forward to my death.' His attitude about death meant that he was living life to its fullest. His gift of no fear is the greatest gift we can give to ourselves or to others. When we give this gift then life is a sacrament, we meet life to its fullest.

May all beings receive the gift of no fear.

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