

# ZEN BOW

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## DEATH-DYING-REBIRTH

### Introduction

The dehumanized atmosphere of the average hospital death has become a tragic sign of our times. The lonely bed of the dying more often than not contains a "sedated, comatose, be-tubed object, subconscious if not sub-human," for the cool efficiency of the medical technocracy has created a laboratory-like environment where human emotions seem almost unwelcome. Undeniably medical practice inherently expresses deep compassion, but that compassion seems to have gone increasingly astray as the art and religion of death have become drowned in the science of prolonging life at any cost. "To die in a hospital, probably while under the mind-benumbing influence of some opiate, or else under the stimulation of some drug injected into the body to enable the dying to cling to life as long as possible," says Evans-Wentz in his Preface to *THE TIBETAN BOOK OF THE DEAD*, "cannot but be productive of an undesirable death, as undesirable as that of a shell-shocked soldier on a battlefield. Even as the normal result of the birth-process may be aborted by malpractices, so similarly may the normal result of the death-process be aborted."

In fairness to the medical profession it ought to be observed that the practice of thwarting the death-process through infusions and injections reflects a cultural pattern which not only sees all pain as pointless but which looks upon death as the 'last great enemy,' to be outwitted and subdued at all costs. So death, which ought to be welcomed as natural and inevitable, becomes the Grim Reaper and dying the terror of all terrors. Yet studies (1) have shown that when the mental state of dying patients is not disturbed by sedation or other medication--in other words, when they are fully conscious and capable of responding to their environment with awareness unimpaired--their predominant emotion is not fear but calmness, the more so if they have established belief in the rebirth-process.

What, then, need a man know that he may pass away with serenity and dignity, transcending his bodily and mental pains, his last thoughts properly directed as advised by the masters? In short, how may his death be meaningful? In this and the following issue the staff of *ZEN BOW* has compiled the sayings of the Zen masters and the wisest minds in other traditions on the subject of Death, Dying and Rebirth. The section on Dying is divided into two parts: how the masters have died and practical instructions to the dying. Death and the Manner of Dying of the Masters occupies this issue; the next will contain practical instructions to the dying and the teachings of the masters on rebirth. Properly, a discussion of rebirth, like that of death, should precede dying, since the manner of a man's death is inevitably influenced by his convictions on the continuity of life, but the length of the material on rebirth dictated that it be placed last.

*"The mind of the Zen adept is taut—ready like a drawn bow."*

The number in parentheses after each quotation is keyed to the References, where the name of the work, the author, and the publisher will be found. ZEN BOW is grateful to the publishers for the use of these quotations.

## I. DEATH

Birth is not a beginning;  
death is not an end. -Chuang-tzu (2)

Death is the protest of the spirit  
against the unwillingness of the formed  
to accept transformation--the protest  
against stagnation. -Govinda (3)

Unlike life, death cannot be taken  
away from man, and therefore we may  
consider it as THE gift of God. -Seneca (4)

### Zen Master Shozan:

A man said to the master, "Of course I never think of death." To which the master responded, "That's all very well, but you'll not get very far in Zen, I'm afraid. As for myself, well, I train in Zen in detestation of death and in hope of deathlessness, and I am resolved to carry on in this way from life to life until I realize my aim. That you do not think of death shows that you are not a man of enlightenment, because you are incapable of knowing your Master, whatever there is in you that uses the six sense organs." (5)

### Lama Anagarika Govinda:

It may be argued that nobody can talk about death with authority who has not died, and since nobody apparently has ever returned from death, how can anybody know what death is or what happens after it?

The Tibetan will answer: 'There is not ONE person, indeed not ONE living being, that has NOT returned from death. In fact, we all have died many deaths before we came into this incarnation. And what we call birth is merely the reverse side of death, like one of the two sides of a coin, or like a door which we call "en-

trance" from outside and "exit" from inside a room.'

It is much more astonishing that not everybody remembers his or her previous death, and because of this lack of remembering, most persons do not believe there was a previous death. But likewise they do not remember their recent birth, and yet they do not doubt that they were recently born. They forget that active memory is only a small part of our normal consciousness, and that our subconscious memory registers and preserves every past impression and experience which our waking mind fails to recall.

There are those who, in virtue of concentration and other yogic practices, are able to bring the subconscious into the realm of discriminative consciousness and thereby to draw upon the unrestricted treasury of subconscious memory, wherein are stored the records not only of our past lives but the records of the past of our race, the past of humanity and of all pre-human forms of life, if not of the very consciousness that makes life possible in this universe. (6)

### Socrates:

To fear death, gentlemen, is nothing other than to think oneself wise when

one is not; for it is to think one knows what one does not know. No man knows whether death may not even turn out to be the greatest of blessings for a human being; and yet people fear it as if they knew for certain that it is the greatest of evils. (7)

#### Appollonius of Tyana:

There is no death of any one but only in appearance, even as there is no birth of any save only in seeming. The change from being to becoming seems to be birth, and the change from becoming to being seems to be death; but in reality no one is ever born, nor does one ever die. (2)

#### Zen Master Ikkyu:

Born like a dream  
In this dream of a world,  
How easy in mind I am,  
I who will fade away  
Like the morning dew. (8)

\* \* \*

The original Man  
Must return to his original  
place.  
Why seek then the needless  
Buddha? (8)

\* \* \*

One prays for the life of tomorrow,  
Ephemeral life though it be.  
This is the habit of mind  
That passed away yesterday. (8)

\* \* \*

The Buddha-nature  
Means non-birth, non-extinction.  
Then know that illusion  
Is birth, death, rebirth. (8)

#### Zen Master Dōgo (Tao-wu):

Dōgo went with his disciple Zengen to a certain house to offer condolences for someone's death. Zengen rapped on the coffin and said to Dōgo, "Is he alive or dead?" Dōgo replied, "I do not say he is alive, I do not say he is dead." Zengen then asked, "Why don't you tell me one way or the other?"

Dōgo answered, "I will not say! I will not say!"

On their way back to the temple Zengen said, "Master, do tell me! If you don't, I'll knock you down!" Dōgo replied, "Strike me if you like --but you won't get a word out of me." Zengen thereupon struck him.

Afterwards, when Dōgo was dead, Zengen went to Sekisō (another of his disciples) and told him what had happened. Sekisō said, "I do not say he was alive, I do not say he was dead." Zengen asked, "Why don't you tell me?" Sekisō said, "I will not say! I will not say!"

Zengen suddenly realized the truth. (4)

#### Sri Ramana Maharshi:

Q: Of what use is the fear of death, which is common to all?

A: True, it is common to all. Such fear serves no useful purpose, because being overpowered by the latent tendencies of the mind, the man dies a natural death. It does not lead him to non-attachment and he cannot investigate the matter.

Q: How then are you giving the same instruction without distinction to visitors?

A: What do I say? The ego in each one must die. Let him reflect on it. Is there this ego or is there not? By repeated reflection one becomes more and more fit. (9)

\* \* \*

...Owing to the I-am-the-body notion, death is feared as being the loss of Oneself. Birth and death pertain to the body only, but they are superimposed on the Self, giving rise to the delusion that birth and death relate to the Self. (9)

\* \* \*

Why do you mourn the loss of your parents? I shall tell you where they are: they are only within ourselves and are ourselves. For the

life-current has passed through innumerable incarnations, births and deaths, pleasures and pains, etc., just as the water current in a river flows over rocks, pits, sands, elevations and depressions on its way, but still the current is unaffected. Again, the pleasures and pains, births and deaths are like undulations on the surface of seeming water in the mirage of the ego. The only reality is the Self from where the ego appears, and runs through thoughts which manifest themselves as the universe and in which the mothers and fathers, friends and relatives appear and disappear. They are nothing but manifestations of the Self. (9)

Teitoku Matsunaga:

The morning glory blooms but an hour and yet it differs not at heart from the giant pine that lives for a thousand years.

To bloom in the morning, to await the heat of the sun, and then to perish--such is the lot appointed to the morning glory by its karma. There are pines, indeed, which have lived for a thousand years, but the morning glory, which must die so soon, never for a moment forgets itself, or shows itself to be envious of others. Every morning its flowers unfold, magically fair, yielding the natural virtue that has been granted to them, then they wither. Thus they manifest their karmic purpose. Why condemn that brevity as vain and profitless? ...The giant pine does not ponder on its thousand years, nor the morning glory on its life of a single day. Each does simply what it must ... [Commentary by Kinso] (10)

Roshi Yasutani:

...What we see [in the world] is illusory, without substance, like the antics of puppets in a film. Are you afraid of dying? You need not be. For whether you are killed or die

naturally, death has no more substantiality than the movements of these puppets. Or to put it another way, it is no more real than the cutting of air with a knife or the bursting of bubbles, which reappear no matter how often they are broken.

Having once perceived the world of Buddha-nature, we are indifferent to death, since we know we will be reborn through affinity with a father and a mother. We are reborn when our karmic relations impel us to be reborn. We die when our karmic relations decree that we die. And we are killed when our karmic relations lead us to be killed. We are the manifestation of our karmic relations at any given moment, and upon their modification we change accordingly. What we call life is no more than a procession of transformations.

If we do not change, we are lifeless. We grow and age because we are alive. The evidence of our having lived is the fact that we die. We die because we are alive. Living means birth and death. Creation and destruction signify life.

When you truly understand this fundamental principle, you will not be anxious about your life or your death. You will then attain a steadfast mind and be happy in your daily life. Even though heaven and earth were turned upside down, you would have no fear. And if an atomic or hydrogen bomb were exploded, you would not quake in terror. So long as you became one with the bomb what would there be to fear? "Impossible!" you say. But whether you wanted to or not you would perforce become one with it, would you not?... (11)

Lao-tzu:

These two (the existent and the non-existent) are the same but have different names. (4)

\* \* \*

He who has grasped life walks through the land meeting no buffaloes

or tigers; in a battle he need not avoid arrows and swords. For a buffalo could not find a place to thrust in his horn, a tiger no place to insert his claws, a soldier none to drive in his weapon. How is this possible? He does not exist in the realm of death (that is, in the relative, life-and-death world.) (4)

Chuang-tzu:

When Chuang-tzu's wife died, Hui-tzu went to offer condolences. He found the widower sitting on the ground, with his legs spread out at a right angle, singing and beating time on a bowl.

'To live with your wife,' exclaimed Hui-tzu, 'and see your eldest son grow up to be a man, and then not to shed a tear over her corpse-- this would be bad enough. But to drum on a bowl and sing, surely this is going too far.'

'Not at all,' replied Chuang-tzu. 'When she died I could not help being affected by her death. Soon, however, I remembered that she had already existed in a previous state before birth, without form, or even substance; that while in that unconditioned condition, substance was added to spirit; that this substance then assumed form; and that the next stage was birth. And now, by virtue of a further change, she is dead, passing from one phase to another like the sequence of spring, summer, autumn, and winter. And while she is thus lying asleep in eternity, for me to go about weeping and wailing would be to proclaim myself ignorant of these natural laws. Therefore I refrain.' (12)

\* \* \*

'All that has form, sound and color may be classed under the head **THING**. Man differs so much from the rest and stands at the head of all things simply because the latter are but what they appear and nothing more. But man can attain to formlessness and vanquish death. And with that which

is in possession of the eternal how can mere things compare?...

'A drunken man who falls out of a cart, though he may suffer, does not die. His bones are the same as other people's, but he meets his accident in a different way. His spirit is in a condition of security. He is not conscious of riding in the cart, neither is he conscious of falling out of it. Ideas of life, death, fear, etc., cannot penetrate his breast and so he does not suffer from contact with objective existences. And if such security is to be got from wine, how much more is it to be got from Tao [the Way]. It is in Tao that the sage seeks his refuge, and so he is free from harm.' (12)

\* \* \*

Lao-tzu happened to be born when it was time for him to be born and, in the process of Nature, died at his appointed time. To be overjoyed at his birth or plunged into inconsolable grief at his death would be equally vulgar and foolish. In olden times a sage who had transcended this relativity of life and death was said to have attained the state of Cutting the Natural Thread. Ordinary people fear death for this reason: they do not see that life and death are one process, both present in any single occurrence. Or again, flame is the burning of the wood, life is the dying of the person. Without burning, the destruction of the wood, there is no heat or light. Without dying, the catabolism of body and personality, there is no life. The wood is consumed to ashes, but the fire, the principle of combustion, is immortal. So men appear and disappear, but the flame of existence burns forever. (4)

Zen Master Dogen:

Buddhism teaches that life does not become death. Accordingly, what we call life is 'no-life.' Buddhism teaches that death does not become life. So what we call death is really 'no-death.' (13)

\* \* \*

It is fallacious to think that you simply move from birth to death. Birth from the Buddhist point of view is a temporary point between the preceding and the succeeding, hence it can be called birthlessness. The same holds for death and deathlessness. In life there is nothing more than life, in death nothing more than death: we are being born and are dying at every moment.

Now to conduct: In life identify yourself with life, at death with death. Abstain from yielding and craving. Life and death constitute the very being of Buddha. Thus should you reject life and death you will lose, and you can expect no more if you cling to either. You must neither loathe, then, nor covet, neither think nor speak of these things. Forgetting body and mind by placing them together in Buddha's hands and letting him lead you on, you will without design or effort gain freedom, attain Buddhahood.

There is an easy road to Buddhahood: avoid evil, do [i.e., think] nothing about life-and-death, be merciful to all sentient things, respect superiors and sympathize with

inferiors, have neither likes nor dislikes, and dismiss idle thoughts and worries. Only then will you become a Buddha. (5)

#### Zen Master Hakuin:

And again, it is extremely foolish to think that one must wait till after one's death in expectation of obtaining all these benefits [of zazen meditation]. It is also the most culpable negligence. Do not grieve as though this is all a matter of something in the far distance. If it was a matter of having to see or hear something in China or India, far beyond the seven-fold tides of the seas, one might grieve. But what we are trying to do is to look at our own mind with our own mind--and that is something closer to us than looking at the pupils of our eyes with our eyes. And do not grieve as if it were something very deep that we are trying to look at. If it were a matter of something to be seen or listened to at the bottom of the nine-fold chasm or under the thousand fathomed depths of the sea, we might grieve--but to look at my own mind with my own mind is less [i.e., more easily done] than smelling my own nose with my own nostrils! (14)

## II. DYING

### 1. Of the Masters and Great Laymen

Dimly for thirty years;  
Faintly for thirty years--  
Dimly and faintly for sixty years:  
At my death I pass my feces and offer them  
to Brahma. [written by Master Ikkyu  
as death approached] (8)

\* \* \*

I shan't die, I shan't go anywhere,  
I'll be here;  
But don't ask me anything,  
I shan't answer.  
[death verse of Master Ikkyu] (8)

### Zen Master Chuho (Chung-feng):

I want to die with a premonition of death the week before, with my mind serenely unshaken and free from attachment to my body, thence to be reborn into the realm of the Buddhas so as to ultimately gain supreme enlightenment through them and receive their sanction, the better that I may be able to save all sentient beings throughout the innumerable worlds. (11)

### Zen Master Takuan:

When on his death-bed, in 1645, he was asked to write a death poem. He refused, but at last wrote the character Yume, Dream, and died. (8)

### Zen Master Tennō (Tien-huang):

When he was on the point of death the monks of the temple came and asked him how he was. He immediately called for the monk in charge of food and clothes in the temple. The monk came to his bedside.

"Do you understand?" Tennō asked.

The monk said, "No, I don't."

Tennō picked up his pillow, threw it outside, and passed away. (15)

### Zen Master Razan (Lo-shan):

Feeling his end near he ascended the rostrum, and for some time held his left hand open. The chief monks could not understand, and he had all the Eastern side monks leave. Then he opened his right hand and told the Western side monks to go away. To the people he said, "If you wish to show your gratitude for the Buddha's goodness to you, you can't be too earnest about propagating the Great Teaching. Now, go out! Go out!" He then burst into a loud laugh and died. (15)

### Zen Master Hofuku (Pao-fu):

When Hofuku was about to die he said to his monks, "For the last ten days my vitality has decreased. It is nothing; simply the time has come." A monk said, "The time has come for you to die--is that all right? To continue living--is that all right?"

Hofuku answered, "It is the Way." The monk asked, "How can I avoid this confusion?" Hofuku said, "It never rains but it pours." With this he sat in the lotus position and passed away. (15)

### Roshi Taji:

As Roshi Taji, a contemporary Zen master, approached death, his senior disciples assembled at his bedside. One of them, remembering the roshi was fond of a certain kind of cake, had spent half a day searching the pastry shops of Tokyo for this confection, which he now presented to Roshi Taji. With a wan smile the dying roshi accepted a piece of the cake and slowly began munching it. As the roshi grew weaker, his disciples leaned close and inquired whether he had any final words for them. "Yes," the roshi replied. The disciples eagerly exclaimed, "Please tell us!"

"My, but this cake is delicious!" and with that he died. (16)

### Roshi Yamamoto:

Almost blind at the age of ninety-six and no longer able to teach or work about the monastery, Zen Master Yamamoto decided it was time to die, so he stopped eating. When asked by his monks why he refused his food, he replied that he had outlived his usefulness and was only a bother to everybody. They told him, "If you die now (January) when it is so cold, everybody will be uncomfortable at your funeral and you will be an even greater nuisance, so please eat!" He thereupon resumed eating, but when it became warm he again stopped, and not long after quietly toppled over and died. (11)

### Zen Master Bassui:

Just before he passed away, at the age of sixty, Bassui sat up in the lotus posture and to those gathered around him said, "Don't be misled! Look directly! What is this?" He repeated it loudly, then calmly died. (11)

### Sri Ramana Maharshi:

"They say that I am dying, but I am not going away. Where could I go? I am here"... (17)

\* \* \*

On Thursday, April 13, a doctor brought Sri Bhagavan [Maharshi] a palliative to relieve the congestion in the lungs, but he refused it. "It is not necessary, everything will come right within two days."

At about sunset Sri Bhagavan told the attendants to sit him up. They knew already that every movement, every touch was painful, but he told them not to worry about that. He sat with one of the attendants supporting his head. A doctor began to give him oxygen, but with a wave of his right hand he motioned him away.

Unexpectedly a group of devotees sitting on the veranda outside the hall began singing 'Arunachala-Siva.' On hearing it, Sri Bhagavan's eyes opened and shone. He gave a brief smile of indescribable tenderness. From the outer edges of his eyes tears of bliss rolled down. One more deep breath, and no more. There was no struggle, no spasm, no other sign of death: only that the next breath did not come. (17)

### Zen Master Yakusan (Yue-shan):

Yakusan's manner of death was of a piece with his life. When he was about to die, he yelled out, "The Hall's falling down! The Hall's falling down!" The monks brought various things and began to prop it up. Yakusan threw up his hands and said, "None of you understood what I meant!" and died. (15)

### Zen Master Tōzan (Shou-chu):

When Tōzan was dying a monk said to him, "Master, your four elements are out of harmony, but is there anyone who is never ill?" "There is," said Tōzan. "Does this one look at you?" asked the monk. "It is my function to look at him," answered Tōzan.

"How about when you yourself look at him?" asked the monk. "At that moment I see no illness," replied Tōzan. (15)

### Zen Master Kassan (Chia-shan):

When Kassan was about to die he called the chief monk and said to him, "I have preached the Way to the monks for many years. The profound meaning of Buddhism is to be known by each person himself. My illusory life is over, I am about to depart. You monks should go on just the same as when I was alive. You should not blindly make ordinary people miserable." Having said this, he immediately passed away. (15)

### Bashō:

From olden times it has been customary to leave behind a death-poem, and perhaps I should do the same. But every moment of life is the last, every poem a death poem! Why then at this time should I write one? In these my last hours I have no poem. (4)

### The Sixth Patriarch (Hui-neng):

The Master said, "Come close. In the eighth month I intend to leave this world"...

Fa-hai and the other monks heard him to the end and wept tears of sorrow...

"You're crying now, but who is there who's really worried that I don't know the place to which I'm going? If I didn't know where I was going, then I wouldn't be leaving you. You're crying just because you don't know where I'm going. If you knew where I was going you wouldn't be crying. The Nature itself is without birth and without destruction, without going and without coming"...

The Master, having finished his verse, then said to his disciples, "Good-by, all of you. I shall depart from you now. After I am gone do not weep worldly tears nor accept condolences, money, and silks from people, nor wear mourning garments.

If you did so it would not accord with the sacred Dharma, nor would you be true disciples of mine. Be the same as you would if I were here, and sit all together in meditation. If you are only peacefully calm and quiet, without motion, without stillness, without birth, without destruction, without coming, without going, without judgments of right and wrong, without staying and without going-- this then is the Great Way. After I have gone just practice according to the Dharma in the same way that you did on the days that I was with you. Even though I were still to be in this world, if you went against the teachings, there would be no use in my having stayed here."

After speaking these words, the Master, at midnight, quietly passed away. He was seventy-six years of age. (18)

#### The Buddha Shakyamuni:

...He then went to Kusinagara, bathed in the river, and gave this order to Ananda: "Arrange a couch for me between those twin Sal trees. In the course of this night the Tathagata will enter Nirvana"...

In full sight of his disciples he lay down on his right side, rested his head on his hand, and put one leg over the other. At that moment the birds uttered no sound, and, as if in trance, they sat with their bodies all relaxed. The winds ceased to move the leaves of the trees, and the trees shed wilted flowers, which came down like tears...

They paid homage to him and then, anguish in their minds, stood around him. And the Sage spoke to them as follows: "In the hour of joy it is not proper to grieve. Your despair is quite inappropriate, and you should regain your composure. The goal, so hard to win, which for many aeons I

have wished for, now at last it is no longer far away. When that is won-- no earth or water, fire, wind or ether present; unchanging bliss, beyond all objects of the senses, a peace which none can take away, the highest thing there is; and when you hear of that, and know that no becoming mars it, and nothing ever there can pass away--how is there room for grief then in your minds? At Gaya, at the time when I won enlightenment, I got rid of the causes of becoming, which are nothing but a gang of harmful vipers; now the hour comes near when I get rid also of this body, the dwelling place of the acts accumulated in the past. Now that at last this body, which harbors so much ill, is on its way out; now that at last the frightful dangers of becoming are about to be extinct; now that at last I emerge from the vast and endless suffering-- is that the time for you to grieve?"...

And the Best of Men, aiming at their welfare and tranquility, addressed to them these meaningful words: "It is indeed a fact that salvation cannot come from the mere sight of me. It demands strenuous efforts in the practice of yoga [zazen]. But if someone has thoroughly understood this my Dharma, then he is released from the net of suffering, even though he never cast his eyes on me. A man must take medicine to be cured; the mere sight of the physician is not enough. Likewise the mere sight of me enables no one to conquer suffering; he will have to meditate for himself about the gnosis I have communicated. If self-controlled, a man may live away from me as far as can be, but if he only sees my Dharma, then indeed he sees me also. But if he should neglect to strive in concentrated calm for higher things, then though he live quite near me, he is far away from me. Therefore be energetic, persevere, and try to control your minds. Do good deeds, and try to win mindfulness!" (19)

(To Be Continued In Next Issue)

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