

LIVING, DYING, AND TRANSFORMATION

A Look at Dying and the Practices of Spiritual Growth

The nature of our relationship with dying has slightly, but still perceptibly, begun to change in our culture. As it does, our relationship with living is also undergoing a shift. As we become increasingly familiar with death and dying—no longer so fixedly holding it at arm's length, we reclaim and open our eyes to the end of life. The trend is growing to surround the time of dying with the presence of loved ones. As we do so, we create the opportunity to become acquainted with the profound spiritual transformations that occur at the edge of life and death. Allowing ourselves to become familiar with the fact of mortality and the reality of dying, we begin to see and want a depth and meaning in the midst of life at a fresh level of clarity and intention. Deepened awareness of our impermanence, quite simply, provides the urgency to want to let go of the confusion of living on the surface.

We are learning that the keys to the depth, the fullness, the meaning and the communion for which we are so hungry, so thirsty, are the same in our living as they are in our dying. Those keys, which both lie in and are the path to awareness beyond self, are manifest in the dying process. There is much to learn from being with dying about the very conditions that allow us to move out of our separation and into communion.

When we have the opportunity to participate as closely as we can in the profound spiritual dimensions of dying, we begin to glimpse that there is far more to life than this world of form, of appearances, of bodies, and words. We may have always sensed and intuited that this far greater life is already everpresent, but there are certain moments when being discloses itself in great radiance. At birth, certainly, there is an increased awareness of sacred dimensions in that majestic and awe-filled moment when life enters form. At death, as life leaves form, there is also a concentrated, increased awareness of sacred dimensions, so powerful that the quality of light in the room with

someone who is dying seems out of the ordinary, the quality of being is experienced as more intense.

It is a privilege to be with people as they near death and as they die. One can see that, as life experience brings us to the moment of death itself, people naturally seem to enter more subtle dimensions of awareness that are spacious and freeing and illuminated. After a long, anguishing, and lonely journey through the endstages of terminal illness, there is a natural response to this new movement into depth. When ordinary people who are actively dying share verbally, they indicate a strong and abiding feeling of safety, speak of a sense of awe, and acknowledge the perfection of this rich and sacred passage.

After working with dying people for several years, I became increasingly aware of a definable period in a human life that I have come to call the Nearing Death Experience. It is an apparently universal phenomenon, occurring anywhere from a few weeks to a few days, a few hours or even the last few moments before death itself. The Nearing Death Experience is marked by a stilling and ceasing of the once- animated physical body, the dissolution and emptying of the separate sense of self, and the emergence of a vast and luminous awareness.

One can witness in people, as they near death and as they die, the same kinds of psychospiritual transformations, in a radically accelerated mode, that one would witness—almost imperceptibly, over time—in people who have a lifelong practice of prayer, contemplation, or meditation. Dying people pass through the same dimensions of sacred awareness known to the saints and sages and mystics--dharma practitioners of every tradition—throughout the centuries. They move deeply into the experience of being.

We know from the world's wisdom traditions that there is a recognized pattern, an acknowledged sequence of unfolding in psychospiritual transformations. As awareness moves into ever more subtle, more inclusive dimensions of the sacred, it does so in a known progression of increasing refinement and enhancement of wisdom and being.

Transformation such as this occurs in a variety of circumstances: committed spiritual practice, the nearing death experience, and the near death or other spontaneous expansions of being. If we look simply at the pace of transformation, at the length of time required for some perceptible measure of spiritual growth, we can picture a continuum that represents the rate of psychospiritual change in each circumstance.

Figure 1.
LENGTH OF TIME FOR SOME MEASURE
OF PSYCHOSPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

decades or years

weeks, days, hours, minutes

instantaneous

Committed Spiritual Practice

The Nearing Death Experience

The Near Death Experience/Other Spontaneous Experiences

daily, stable prayer, contemplation or meditation, that brings forth gradual, deep, and beautifully, thoroughly lived enhancement and refinement of both wisdom and being in the practitioner due to intention

an apparently universal process in the terminally ill, occurring anywhere from a few weeks to a few days, sometimes even hours or minutes before death, marked by the dissolution of the body and the separate sense self and the emergence of a sense of grace

where ordinary consciousness is catapulted by trauma or other means into dimensions of awareness characterized as profoundly spiritual: i.e., (usually lower levels of) the transpersonal realms; a rare occurrence

At one point of the continuum is the kind of gradual, relatively steady, hard-to-pinpoint although discernable lifelong transformation one would witness in people who have a stable daily spiritual practice. At the other end of the continuum are the kinds of experiences chronicled in the near-death and spontaneous awakening literature. In this latter type of experience, spontaneous experience of many types of "altered" states of consciousness, people report rapid, immediate movement through dimensions of awareness that are repeatedly and almost consistently described as "spiritual," as transformative. People speak of immersion in qualities of awareness beyond self: unconditional love, a deep and non-conceptual knowing (although often related afterward in familiar concepts), a sense of the perfection of each life and of Life itself.

That which I have been privileged to witness, the approach to death brought about by terminal illness, lies in the middle of this continuum, as measured by the unfolding time of these psychospiritual transformations. The pace of the transformations at the endstages of terminal illness is much faster than that of the slow pace of the lifelong meditator and yet less rapid than the experiences known to those who have had a near-death experience or other spontaneous awakening. In fact, the pace is like that of slow-motion photography, almost at the perfect speed to observe the course of spiritual transformation and the dynamics of that course.

We cannot imagine, as we sit in the apparent safety and security of our health, the magnitude of the changes wrought upon the separate sense of self by terminal illness. Living and breathing with the certain knowledge that one is on an unstoppable trajectory of death is a powerful crucible of transformation.

With the opportunity to sit with so many people at the very end of their lives, simply being with them, listening to them, breathing with them, meditating with them, we can begin to observe and chart a map of their inner passage out of ordinary mind and through the landscape beyond self.

Terminal illness brings dramatic changes to the appearance we have always taken for granted, to the accustomed abilities upon which we have always based our sense of who we are, to the roles we have taken to maintain a sense of "me." If anything can

loosen our identification with the contracted, separate sense of self, terminal illness eventually will. The dying process uncovers the contractions of desires and fears that have always blocked us from the experience of transpersonal awareness. Not only does the process of dying uncover these contractions, these tell-tale habits of "selfing," it weakens our capacity to maintain them. We begin to relax, finally, into far greater being.

As people come close to the end of life in a physical body, sacred qualities, "Being values" as Maslow would call them, begin to manifest in and through them. These are qualities that we do not ordinarily experience or observe in the course of hectic day-to-day life, in the separate sense of self and its ordinary state of waking consciousness, largely unmindful unless mindfulness is cultivated. These higher-order qualities emerge naturally in human beings as our awareness moves into higher or deeper or more subtle levels, as identity with the small, separate sense of self of the personality or ego begins to thin and erode, whether that be through sustained spiritual practice or the course of terminal illness.

As we move through the momentous transformation of dying, away from the distractions at the periphery of life and more deeply into the very center of being, qualities of grace emerge. Nearing death, people report (and those who are present can often observe) qualities of deep relaxation, of radiance, of withdrawal, of interiority, of knowing and more essential being, of transcendence, and of the sacred. These qualities of grace, as surely as any of the physical "signs and symptoms" which medical professionals are trained to notice, are spiritual "signs and symptoms" that announce the closeness of death.

These qualities are marks of wholeness and holiness, usually observed in the "best" among us—the most authentic or self-actualized or evolved among us. These are the qualities one can witness in another or know in one's self in our finest moments, when the light of awareness beyond self shines through the personality. With the realization that these qualities also emerge in ordinary people as they come close to death, with reflection and experience, it becomes increasingly clear that there is an essential unity of psychospiritual transformation in both the dying process and in

meditative or contemplative practice.

There is a remarkable similarity between the circumstances and the consequences of both contemplative practice and the dying process. The process of transformation is the same in each. The only difference is that, with a meditative or contemplative practice, we choose to enter a transformative practice. In dying, we are chosen.

Psychospiritual transformation occurs in both the dying process and in meditative or contemplative practice precisely because each is an experience that loosens our identification with ego, this separate sense of self. Each pries loose our grasp on being this "somebody" we believe ourselves to be. This "somebody," this mental ego with which we have identified during the decades of our life is a set of habitual, patterns that is strong, coherent, wily, and stubborn.

Throughout the ages, humanity's explorers and lovers of Spirit have discovered that special conditions are required to move awareness beyond identification with the personal, separate sense of self. Skillful means, authentic and powerful practices designed to achieve such a goal, have been developed. These authentic skillful means—the deep, inner practices of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, for example—form our meditative, contemplative, spiritual heritage.

Any and every skillful, authentic spiritual practice has been shaped to frustrate the level of consciousness with which we currently identify—to expose it, undermine it, destabilize it. The dynamics are simple. We maintain our present level of identity/awareness/being by resisting the next higher or deeper or more subtle level.

This present level is, for most of us, the ordinary mind of ego. Our ego grasps at maintaining its personal level of consciousness, its separate self-sense, with the urgency of life and death. Not only is this personal self known and familiar, it has created and maintains the illusion of its own sovereignty. Especially at midlife, however, we begin to experience urges, longings, deeper than those of the ego. We begin to experience our independence, the illusion so carefully constructed, as a tense prison of separation, and our self-control, again the illusion so carefully held to, as our own barrier to simply being. At the sustained and applied insistence of this deeper

need for more freedom from reactivity, more stable peace, some of us choose to begin our attempts to break free from the knotted layers of tension and confusion. We attempt this expansion, this liberation from ordinary mind, with a stable and committed spiritual practice. A spiritual or contemplative practice erodes ego's resistance. Motivation must be high. In the dying process, the terminal illness itself ensures that we stay the course.

Many spiritual traditions recommend the contemplation of death as an essential spiritual practice and teach learning how to die while still in the midst of life. Buddha taught his followers that, "Of all meditations, that on death is supreme." Centuries later, St. Gregory said, "No one knows so much of God as the one who is thoroughly dead." And, certainly the recognition of our mortality is a spur to pursuing a life of greater depth and meaning. The reality of death, as we integrate the fact of our mortality, can be a powerful and liberating wake-up call. We begin to search for the key to the subtle realms of the sacred that we somehow know with the most basic human intuition are already everpresent, sustaining us, here and now...if we could just find the gate.

However, there is more than the acknowledgement, the full integration, of the fact of our mortality in this notion of meditation as learning to die while still in the midst of life. Meditation goes far beyond the contemplation of death. Meditation attempts to imitate, even in some senses physiologically, the experience of dying. Spiritual practices seem to mimic the circumstances and conditions through which we live as we come close to death.

Let us take a closer look at some of the circumstances into which both living with terminal illness and moving toward dying lead us. Medieval Catholic traditions looked at these circumstances as producing liminal, or threshold, experiences in the movement beyond mind, into soul, and then into Spirit. Eastern traditions look at these conditions as *bodhimandalas*: entry points into far greater awareness of pure being. These conditions to which dying lead us naturally are the gates to grace for which we search in the midst of life—"hidden," as the Jesuits say, "in plain view."

The relentless, progressive weakening and ensuing physical disablements of terminal illness forcefully separate us from the life we have always known. Activities, achievements, simple roles and tasks whose doing we have always taken for granted, slip beyond our reach. Eventually, even movement becomes difficult and we are confined, increasingly, to the bed, to the meditation pillow, the “one seat” as Zen practitioners call it. Our life becomes so much less about doing, so much more about being—quite a new stance, especially in our culture.

As disease brings us closer to death, we withdraw from the world. Its distractions and their seeming importance interest us less and less. We become more “disenchanted.” We spend more time alone, secluded, as the rest of the world goes busily about its days. Bodily changes of every sort and loss of effective functioning in various organ systems change our appearance, that anchor to ego, the very face of the persona we have always presented to the world as “me.” They change our capacities and our needs. One woman described the course of her dying as an “ego-ectomy.” Our independence is gradually stripped away as we become ever more helpless. We are humbled.

As a terminal illness’ effects increase in intensity, we pay close attention to physical symptoms and sensations. Although our attention moves to far more subtle stimuli right at the edge of death, through the course of living with terminal illness we develop a new awareness or mindfulness of moment-by-moment existing that we may have always kept below the threshold of consciousness. The distance the ego has always held between its own immortal image of itself and its vulnerably mortal body decreases. There is a healing of that previous separation between the mind and the body and, with the healing, an increased sense of presence, a deepened experience of existing, of just being.

Increasingly, as the disease progresses, our attention is drawn inward. We begin to access dimensions of awareness that we find only in our own deep interior and quiet. This leaves us with less to say in terms of idle chatter, more essential words to say in terms of love and resolution of the tasks of our lives. We are not as frivolous, close to death, as we ordinarily are in the midst of life. One person told me, “I always treated my life as if it were a dress rehearsal. But dying is very real.” Right before death

itself, silence ensues. There is a hushing, a stilling, and the words used are not so much the words of logic and reason but of depth and intensity, as our consciousness begins to explore and experience more subtle and radiant dimensions.

Close to death, quite often the only movement that is possible is the rise and fall of the chest, the inhalation and exhalation as we are breathing our last breaths. There is often close and careful mindfulness of breath, the relaxed vigilance of deep meditation, at this juncture. The breath is life itself in this dimension of being. We begin to enter awareness of "being breathed," in and out, taking in which each inhalation all that we need, letting go with each exhalation of all that we no longer need.

For many people, the endstages of terminal illness and entry into the dying process bring experiences of images, visions, and archetypes. Angels may beckon, dead loved ones may visit, images of sacred Being become stronger. Many dying people indicate that these sacred images become so strong that awareness begins to merge with them. Over and over, I have heard such things as: "I feel God filling me." "I am turning into light." "I feel like I'm entering something vast."

And, as we lie on the bed dying, all that has held the separate sense of self so tightly together unravels, in weakness, in profound confrontation with an energetic awareness so much larger than this small, constructed personality. We begin to question who we are. So much of what has made us the "somebody" with which we've always identified has already disappeared. There is an awareness of a deeper reality at the farthest limits of our self-inquiry. It is the same awareness that reads this page right now but, close to death, pure awareness no longer takes the back seat to the obscurations of our frenzied thoughts, emotions, hopes, and fears. Close to death, the frenzy is stilled. The gate is opened. We begin to experience, as did Meister Eckhart, the great Christian mystic, that "the eye in me that is seeing God is the eye in God that is seeing me."

The process of dying brings us to our knees. We surrender. After all the resistance, there is a moment where we begin to recognize that the very power we have been resisting is, in fact, our own deepest nature, is that "be-ing" for which we've always

longed. Instead of contracting in fear, we enter open-armed, open-eyed, in love, into Love. As Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, "Enlightenment for a wave is the moment the wave realizes that it is water. At that moment, all fear of death disappears."

Here is a simple listing of the similarities of the circumstances and consequences of dying and meditative practices. The list includes some of the most powerful "special conditions" of transformation, the gates to deep spiritual groundedness.

FIGURE 2.

DYING AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES: Similarities of Circumstances and Consequences

"Taking the One Seat"	consistent and sustained application of attention stability of practice growing capacity to just be entering bare awareness movement into subtle dimensions of the sacred
Withdrawal/Seclusion	reduction of distractions atrophying of habitual emotional/mental patterns movement out of consensual reality deactivation of worldly persona opening to deeper insight into reality
The Stance of Humility	stark recognition of our ordinariness illusions of separate self being in control crumble structures of former ego identity erode increasing relaxation of the "contraction" of ego deeper compassion developed

The Practice of Presence	<p>less mediated experience of reality</p> <p>growing ability to be at ease with what's occurring</p> <p>sharpened and ingathered attention</p> <p>hunger for depth</p> <p>deepened experience of be-ing</p>
The Practice of Silence	<p>internal dialogue maintaining ego slowed, diminished</p> <p>the emptying of the mind begins</p> <p>emergence of "still small voice within"</p> <p>absorption/illumination/direct realization emerge</p> <p>state of "natural great peace" uncovered</p>
Mindfulness of Breath	<p>presence nurtured</p> <p>awareness of penetration of life-beyond-form</p> <p>illusions of duality begin to be healed</p> <p>focus on intersection with not-self</p> <p>tender communion with more subtle wholeness</p>
Images and Visions	<p>unique call to each individual essence</p> <p>archetype draws awareness to itself</p> <p>infusion of being with qualities of archetype</p> <p>movement into transpersonal dimensions of archetype</p> <p>merge with image of own essential nature</p>
Self-Inquiry	<p>the emergence of "not knowing," beginner's mind</p> <p>illusion of separate self pierced</p> <p>openness to each new moment</p> <p>first dawning of insight into reality, of wisdom</p> <p>groundlessness seen, leading to spiritual groundedness</p>

Surrender

dissolution of the inessential
cessation of resistance and fractured separateness
participatory stance in be-ing
the development of fearlessness
the end of two and the opening into One

The "special conditions" of death lead us directly to the grace in dying. Following the path of those special conditions in the midst of life can lead us to the grace in living. It is purposefully, mindfully, courageously, and joyfully living in the light of death. We can, with motivation and commitment, enter an awareness that is, always and everywhere, birthless and deathless: the eternal and radiant ground of being, present in this very moment.

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