

THE END IS THE BEGINNING

The last phase of anything - a year or a life - can be a most enlightening and enriching experience

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The monk asked that we chop down the list, one by one. It was a difficult, heart-wrenching game. Mock play it may have seemed, but what would we choose to disown were we going to die the next day? The underlying message was decidedly grave. There would be no negotiations. Eventually we would have to abandon every item on the shortlist of the 10 most important things we cherished in life.

Giving up is not easy. All these years, we have been struggling, striving, storing away. Money. Fame. Love. Knowledge. Memories. And the more we have, the more we want. There never seems to be enough.



Phra Paisan Visalo

But in retrospect, the exercise was spiritually eye-opening, even uplifting.

It was part of a recent meditation-workshop retreat aptly named "Meeting Death with a Peaceful Heart" led by Phra Paisan Visalo. The mere soul-searching process of identifying what we value most in life already provided food for thought - who, exactly, is this existence called "me"? A composite of material and immaterial aspirations, only partly fulfilled, only manifest in this temporal space and time? Which part can we hold on to as ours forever? Is there such a thing, really?

Contrary to general perceptions, contemplating death is not the exclusive task of morbid minds. And not just for devout Buddhists, either. Indeed, it is what every one of us must do, according to Phra Paisan, if we want to be truly alive. The business of living and dying is one and the same. When we know how to die, we will know how to live. When correctly understood, there is nothing to fear about death. Ironically, we are completely unprepared for this inevitable fact of life. We prefer to brush the thought of it aside, to laugh at it, pretend it won't come to us, or at least not too soon.

One certainty about death is, however, the uncertainty of how and when it will knock at our door. It may come with tremendous pain; it may be months or years of agony. The best of technology may prolong life, but it can never prevent death. "The next life may arrive more quickly than tomorrow," Phra Paisan said.

As a child learns to walk, we too can try rehearsing the act of dying, sharpening our skill, our awareness, so that if and when the final moment arrives we will not be altogether at a loss. We could turn crisis into opportunity, Phra Paisan said. The sign of a "good" death is not that it is painless, that we die while being surrounded by our loved ones, or while asleep. Rather, we could die tormented by disease, or from a sudden, fatal accident. But as long as we are able to maintain our mindfulness, equanimity and willingness to let go

during that ultimate period of time, we could turn our last passage into an enriching, enlightening experience. Our passing on will not be futile.

As in walking, we are not in a rush to reach the destination. We trudge on steadily, slowly, absorbing the beauty that blossoms along the path of life. By beauty, we don't mean merely the sensually pleasant. During the retreat, at every dawn and dusk, Phra Paisan led the participants on a silent walk. The golden sunrise was as much appreciated as the darkening sky. We welcomed the caressing wind as we did the swarming mosquitoes. Myriad thoughts arose, stayed momentarily, faded away. We did not have to dispel them, or push them to the deepest recesses of the mind. Like everything else, they would not last.

Every now and then, Phra Paisan would invite the bell - the clear, resonant sound that brought us back to the present step, the step of mindfulness.

When we return to the very step we are taking, moment by moment, we can resume our stable, balanced mind. We will be able to see clearly how we have unwittingly tortured ourselves in the past. Or how we became agitated about what might happen in the future. We will realise our ignorance, become aware of our clinging to the notions of me-and mine-ness, our steadfast refusal to let go, our blindness to the course of nature that keeps unfolding at every moment.

What is the course of nature? Phra Paisan put it simply: the process of dying (and being born again) takes place all the time. The unpleasant is innate in the pleasant. Youth precedes old age. Sickness lurks beneath robust health. Maturity heralds decay. Suffering is intertwined with happiness. Death always trails behind birth. How could we sever any one part of this cycle of samsara, and wish it could be made to last forever?

But look longer. And deeply. A bigger, more whole and completely different picture will emerge. In a way, what we see as (and call) death and birth do not actually exist. They are just a perennial series of change. A cocoon does not die; it transforms into a butterfly. Withered leaves blend back into the earth, enriching the soil. There is no one who dies, no one who is born.

Ultimately, when there is no birth, how can there be death? Seeing thus leads to accepting. And freedom. A free mind is light, alert, fresh. It is ready. It is prepared. It does not own anything, yet it accommodates everything. It is not bound; it does not judge. It is open to limitless possibilities. It does not exist for its own sake.

So when the final moment comes, a prepared mind will not resist. It will not cling tenaciously to life. For having constantly prepared for death, it has been living the fullest life. What should have been done has been done. Now another chapter, the most fortuitous lesson to be learned, has just begun. The walker is returning to the forest. Returning to the place where it all began.



Just as a toddler learns how to walk, we can rehearse our last passage in life by cultivating mindfulness, equanimity and a willingness to let go