

Discovering Death

Collected by Ajahn Sujan
Varapunya Meditation Centre



REPORT	2
SOUL MIDWIFERY TALK	3
POEM	7
DYING AND FUNERAL	8
A SPEECH ON DEATH AND MINDFUL LIVING	10
DEATH AND DYING IN BUDDHISM	12
GOD'S GARDEN	15
GALLERY	16

Report

Aberdeen interfaith meeting on 'discovering death'

Saturday 16th November

Outline of the afternoon & proceedings

- Nigel

After lunch we came back to hear the second pair of main speakers, followed by briefer contributions from representatives of three faiths and finally a panel discussion. First, we had a very informative talk from Annette MacDonald from the Salvation Army though the hat she was wearing was that of someone who had been a funeral director. She took us through all the various things that have to be done when someone dies.

Astrid Bendoric then spoke to the theme 'shining light on death' and sought to show we should not be afraid of death as fear of the unknown. She refers to what people have reported of near-death experiences and stressed that the way we interpret these depend very much on our cultural backgrounds.

Orit Adam from the Jewish community spoke of the Jewish approach to death including acceptance of the idea of heaven but not that of hell. Noor Mahmoud as a Muslim spoke of their approach to the afterlife and the need for preparation for it. Mr Regmi gave us a fairly detailed account of Hindu practices and beliefs in connection with death.

There was then for about half an hour a panel discussion between the main speakers and many others in the room about various aspects, practical and religious/theological, of death. At the end Nigel who facilitated the afternoon thanked everyone for their very different contributions to what had been a successful day. The general feeling was expressed that it had been an extremely useful day in which we had learnt a lot about one another's practices and beliefs and had done so in a respectful way which is such an important part of interfaith dialogue.

SOUL MIDWIFERY TALK

- Caroline Cormack

"The Soul Midwives Movement was set up by Felicity Warner nearly twenty-five years ago but is based on the belief that we all have an ancestral memory of how to sit with the Dying and help them experience a peaceful and loving death.

Felicity began her journey into Soul Midwifery as a health journalist who was writing a series of in-depth articles about what it was like to die young. After developing deep relationships with these women as they were going through their dying process, she then began volunteering at her local hospice and sitting with others close to death. She found that offering support and reassurance could help allay fears and realised how miraculous and rich a good death could be.

She started to see a pattern in the deaths she witnessed, with definite stages covering physical, emotional and spiritual shifts, a common experience of dying that could be missed in the busy medical context.

Felicity continued to work with the dying and one day someone called her at home and asked to speak to the 'Soul Midwife' – the first time her work had been given a name and it stuck and this led to her establishment of the Soul Midwifery Movement and Soul Midwives School in the UK.

She began researching the act of dying as a sacred time in traditional and indigenous societies and developed her own understanding of death, which she feels is a transition where our consciousness survives. She believes a good death is a wonder and is a process of release which may include sadness and fear but can also include the soul blossoming and a divine sense of grace.

The training she has developed has drawn on what she has learnt from ancient traditions – the art of dying well used to be taught widely – seen as a life skill in Egypt, Tibet, India and throughout Europe into the middle ages and involved prayers, spiritual practices, sometimes body work such as yoga and breathing techniques, chanting, music, sacred dance and healing herbs.

In her book, *The Soul Midwives Handbook*, Felicity shares sacred practices from ancient Egypt and Tibetan Buddhists as well as other traditional societies. For example, Chinese and Tibetan systems are based on seeing the human body as instruments of energy and talk about our chi (life force). The Celtic traditions created an atmosphere of beauty and tenderness through poetry, music and ritual.

My Journey Into Soul Midwifery

This probably began when my dad was dying in 2002. He had cancer and his main wish was to die at home. Fortunately myself, my mum and sisters were able to facilitate that and we instinctively created as peaceful an environment as we could, playing his favourite classical music and providing massage and soothing touch.

A few years later as I was doing my Interfaith Ministers course we were studying ceremony and were asked to write our own funeral and do work around accepting our own death. After my course I started holding funerals and this felt like a real privilege.

I became involved in hospital chaplaincy visiting and was employed in Unitarian ministry and these roles included visiting people as they were dying. It always felt like an honour to be able to spend time with them and offer deep listening and reassuring words.

In 2021 I got a very last-minute invite to attend a talk by Jude Meryl the Scottish Co-ordinator and Mentor of Soul Midwives Scotland and I came away feeling a sense that I had 'come home' – I felt uplifted and realised how much I enjoyed talking about death and dying!

So in January 2022 I started my online training with Felicity and other inspiring trainers and by the end of 2023 I had completed the requisite assignments and case studies and qualified.

By this time my mum who lived fairly nearby with my sister had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and I had the enormous honour of spending a lot of time with her during her final months and helping enable her to have a very peaceful and loving death in April of this year.

It was invaluable to have learnt more about the dying process by then – it helped give me the confidence to support her more fully, to be able to have open discussions with her about what she wanted and recognise her needs relating to the stages of dying.

So what do I and other soul midwives do and how do we work?

We are non-denominational multi (or no) faith practitioners who holistically guide and support those going through the dying process. We aim to ensure the dying person (friend) has a loving, dignified and peaceful death. We aim to provide loving care with a very human touch.

Soul Midwives are non-medical and we work alongside various medical professionals.

We may start working with someone when they have recently had a terminal diagnosis, in which case there is more time to build a trusting relationship and make plans for their future care, introducing them to different therapies, meditation techniques etc.

We may work with them through the elemental stages of dying, offering deep listening, support, therapies and holding a loving, sacred space for them and their family.

Soul Midwives very much see each person they work with as an individual and look at their unique needs, offering what feels right for them.

We are trained to observe and work with the elemental stages of dying – these are linked to the four elements held in our bodies withdrawing as the body shuts down.

The Earth element relates to physical vitality and can take many years to withdraw as people become more frail. They can be supported with regular visits, memory work, providing physical comfort and nutritional food as well as soothing touch and reassurance if this is needed.

The Water element may take a few months to withdraw and the person may need more reassurance at this stage as some emotional and spiritual needs may come to the surface, so deep listening, blessing and other emotional/spiritual support can be very helpful.

The Fire element withdraws usually within weeks or days of death and relates to major bodily organs and the sense of sight. The person may just have ‘tunnel vision’ or see things we cannot. They may become very agitated and try to remove bedclothes etc so this stage can be greatly helped by calm reassurance and some circular gentle movements of massage or hand holding if that feels right.

The final element to withdraw as someone dies is Air. Their breathing patterns may change, and they may cry out sometimes. It is very important at this stage for everything to be quiet and gentle around the person, for the space to be very peaceful with no bright lights or disturbances.

Death occurs when all the elements have withdrawn, and each person’s experience will be unique. There are emotional, physical and spiritual differences for each individual.

Soul Midwives offer their particular skills and experience to help in a variety of ways. Some will use essential oils, Reiki, massage, music, singing, chanting, flowers, soft lighting, they will want to make the room personal and peaceful. Photos, cards, loving messages, meditations and visualisations, breathing techniques may be encouraged if that is right for the person who is dying.

We value self-care very highly for our own well being and to maintain balance and strength in our role.

The Twelve Principles of Soul Midwifery

1. To work as non-medical holistic companions who guide and support a dying person in order to facilitate a gentle and tranquil death.
2. To support and recognise the individual needs of the dying person and ensure that they feel loved and supported.
3. To create and hold a sacred and healing space for the dying person (whether in a hospital, a hospice or at home).

4. To respect and honour a dying person's religious/spiritual or atheist/agnostic beliefs and practices.
5. To work as non-denominational, multi-faith practitioners who honour the dying person's beliefs about life, death or the afterlife.
6. To listen, provide gentle therapeutic techniques, and ensure compassionate care at all times.
7. To 'serve' our friend; not aim to 'fix' or 'rescue'.
8. To give healing, using sound, touch, colour, scented oils or other gentle techniques to alleviate pain and anxiety.
9. To keep a loving vigil.
10. To work holistically with the spirit and soul of our friends at all levels and stages of transition.
11. To support families and their loved ones, giving loving care with a human touch.
12. To provide comfort, continuous support and reassurance in helping a dying person to experience the death he or she wants.

For more information please visit the following websites:

www.soulmidwives.co.uk

www.cccelebrancy.org.uk

POEM

I think it is this that we came for

- Nell Aurelia

I think it is this that we came for:
not the grief, it's the connection in our grief,
the sharing in the vast, aching cycles of changes.
not the loss, no:
the tender witness we can be in loss.

I think it is this that we came for:
not the sadness, not the confusion,
when the unthinkable happens and all is plunged into darkness,
it's the reaching out and holding tight to each other's' hands
in that darkness, if and when it comes.
not the despair, the deep, sharp, bone scattering despair,
but the tenderness of mourning together,
of not turning aside, if and when it comes.

I think it is this that we came for:
to be broken open and still find beauty;
to face death and still know love;
to rediscover our complete connection;
to experience fully grief and joy
and that nothing before or ahead can be lost
in these golden fields of spirit
that cradle us all.
I think it is this that we came for.

Dying and funeral

- *Annette MacDonald Dip. FD*

A brief summary of the key points in the presentation given by Mrs Annette MacDonald, Dip. FD, now of The Salvation Army, who has recently moved on after 25 years working in the funeral industry. Annette also gave further insight into, and illustration of, some of the practicalities and processes involved in dealing with and caring for the deceased and their loved ones.

As professional people, we are all met with topics and situations which on a day to days basis are dealt with without hesitation, without fear or trepidation and we are able to analyse our answers, responses and actions in a rational and calm way. Yet there is one subject out there that fills most of us with dread – I speak of course about death, whether it be the death of a close family member, a friend or a colleague.

What happens next, who do we call, what kind of funeral will we have, should we have a minister, should the service be in church and do we opt for burial or cremation, these are just some of the things that have to be thought about. All too often – because of our own fear of the unknown, we never speak about this to our family, mainly because we don't want to upset anyone. However, by not speaking about our own demise or what kind of funeral we would want, we upset our family all the more - by putting additional upset onto them at their time of grief. What additional grief you might ask, the simple answer to that question is; leaving our loved ones to make extremely difficult decisions about the funeral.

Funeral directors - in our role, we meet bereaved families who have no idea about the kind of service they should have for their recently deceased loved one, the lack of conversation about death has left many unanswered questions which are almost impossible to second guess. The task now set out before them is to meet with the funeral director and piece together a befitting final farewell. This is where the professionalism and experience of the funeral director comes to the fore, it is our job to ensure that the family are looked after and given choices, choices about the options available to them. Without trying to emotionally overload our clients, we talk them through the process of funeral arranging, we will complete the legal documentation required to allow the funeral service to proceed, but our role is more than just that of an administrator, we are advisors, confidante, friendly face, caregivers, masters of ceremony and most importantly – caretakers of the deceased. Our utmost responsibility is to care for each and every deceased with the dignity and respect they deserve, and it is our privilege to help at such a vulnerable time.

Please don't think for one second that by not discussing death, you are being criticised, this is purely an observation made over many years in the funeral profession. Part of our role is to dispel the myths surrounding death, to alleviate any fears you may have and to openly and honestly discuss what happens during the funeral preparation if you wish to know. We are also on hand to speak to anyone who may be faced with a terminal illness and has expressed a wish to organise their own service in advance, a very selfless act, one which takes a great deal of courage and compassion shown to those who will be left behind.

Each and every funeral director has aseptic mortuary facilities which allows the greatest of care to be taken when dealing with deceased. We take into consideration the many cultural traditions and will work with each and every family to ensure that the funeral service is what they want, what they expect, and what they need in order to say a final farewell which is special to them and fits in with their beliefs, cultures and traditions, whether that be the deceased is to be laid to rest within a short period of time, or it is the kinsfolk who need to wash and dress their loved one.

A Speech on Death and Mindful Living

- Ajahn Sujana

When we were young, many of us may have heard about someone's death—a distant relative, a name in the news, a story passed around the dinner table.

But at that age, it often didn't stir much in us. It felt far away—like something that happened to others, not to us.

Death was a story that belonged to someone else.

But as we grow older, something changes.

The story of death becomes more familiar. It comes closer. We hear of grandparents passing, friends we once laughed with, mentors who shaped our lives, colleagues who sat beside us.

Slowly, these stories begin to settle into our hearts.

They no longer feel distant. Our emotions shift. And we begin to ask:

Why is this happening around me? Why did my parents die?

Why did my friend, or my kind colleague, leave so soon?

In those moments of sorrow, a wise heart begins to reflect—not with fear, but with clarity:

This, too, is part of my journey.

This is a sign that my own time is also drawing nearer.

And with that awareness, we begin to walk a little more mindfully.

We realize that death is not just a conclusion—it is a reminder.

A reminder to live fully, truthfully, and gently—before our own time comes.

Because the truth is, we don't know how long we have.

We don't know when our final breath will come.

All we truly have is this moment—this very moment.

And in this shared moment, across different faiths and backgrounds, we can agree:

Life is precious.

Time is sacred.

And love, kindness, and presence are universal.

So let us not waste our days in anger or regret.

Let us not dwell in what has already passed, or fear what lies ahead.

Let us avoid doing harm. Let us do good.

And let us keep our minds and hearts clear, compassionate, and awake.

Let us be grateful—grateful that we are breathing, walking, speaking, sharing, and sitting in the warmth of this gathering.

Because this moment is a gift.

And this moment is enough.

Let me leave you with the words of the Buddha:

“Ardently do today what must be done. Who knows? Tomorrow, death comes.”

— The Dhammapada, Verse 236

Thank you.

Death and Dying in Buddhism

- Vinnie

First, let me briefly introduce Theravāda Buddhism. Theravāda, often called the “Doctrine of the Elders,” is the oldest surviving Buddhist school. Originating directly from the teachings of our great teacher, the Buddha, Theravāda Buddhism is neither merely a religion nor a philosophy alone. Rather, it can best be understood as an **art of living**, emphasizing how we can align our lives harmoniously with the natural rhythms of existence.

In Buddhism, we're taught to live gently, respecting and appreciating nature without causing harm. Mindfulness, or clear awareness, is a central practice. When we live mindfully, we significantly reduce the likelihood of causing harm through negative speech, harmful actions, and harmful thoughts. We learn to avoid unnecessary arguments, harsh speech, hatred, and unhealthy cravings, enabling us to live more peaceful and fulfilling lives.

The Buddha summarized his teachings with three core principles:

1. **Refrain from doing evil:** Avoid causing harm in thought, word, or deed.
2. **Cultivate good deeds:** Actively help and support others, enhancing the well-being of everyone around us.
3. **Purify the mind:** Continuously work on developing mindfulness, compassion, and wisdom.

Among these, purifying the mind is fundamental, for our mind holds tremendous power. It shapes our reality and determines our happiness and suffering.

Death: A Universal Reality

Let us now return to tonight's central theme—death and dying. Is immortality possible? Can we escape death? The answer, clearly, is no. Death is inevitable and an intrinsic part of life. The Buddha taught clearly that birth and death are inseparable. From the moment we enter this world, our lifespan is defined by two primary energies: **life energy** and **karmic energy**.

To illustrate this, imagine a candle. The wax symbolizes our life energy, while the wick represents our karmic energy. Just as candles vary in size, colour, and lifespan, humans are born into diverse conditions—different appearances, socio-economic backgrounds, and life expectancies. Buddha explained four ways a human life may end:

1. **Natural completion of life energy:** When the wax (life energy) is fully consumed, our life naturally ends.
2. **Completion of karmic energy:** Even if the wax remains, when the wick (karmic energy) is depleted, our life ends.

3. **Simultaneous depletion:** Both life and karmic energies end simultaneously, marking a natural and harmonious conclusion.
4. **Premature or sudden death:** Despite having sufficient life and karmic energies, unexpected events—such as accidents, illnesses, or natural disasters—can abruptly terminate life.

Acknowledging death as a natural phenomenon helps us approach it without fear, anxiety, or resistance.

Understanding Suffering and Attachment

What causes suffering? Buddha taught that suffering arises from attachment. Attachments to family, friends, material possessions, and our identities lead to immense pain, especially when confronting loss or death. The stronger our attachments, the greater our suffering when forced to separate from them.

Therefore, Buddhist practice encourages gradual, mindful detachment—not through avoidance, but by recognizing impermanence and practicing letting go. Cultivating such awareness helps us approach death peacefully and gracefully when the inevitable moment arrives.

Life and death are two inseparable sides of existence. By learning the art of mindful living, we naturally learn the art of mindful dying.

The Art of Living and the Art of Dying

Every day offers an opportunity to practice both the art of living and the art of dying.

Begin each day by reflecting on your blessings. Stand in front of a mirror each morning and appreciate your life. Remind yourself, "How fortunate I am to be alive and healthy today. How fortunate to witness the beauty of nature, to breathe freely, and to experience kindness." Cultivating self-love and compassion towards others, even those who may treat you unkindly, transforms your life into a meaningful journey. By choosing not to react negatively or become upset by others' words or actions, you retain peace and serenity.

Similarly, each morning, reflect on your mortality: "Today could be my last day. I will therefore live mindfully, kindly, and without anger or resentment. I will cherish each moment, choosing compassion over conflict." This awareness is known in Buddhism as "maranasati," or mindfulness of death. Regular practice reduces attachment and prepares your mind, so that when your final moment arrives, you face it with dignity, peace, and acceptance.

In Buddhism, death is not the ultimate end but a transition—a new beginning. The quality of our next life depends on how we have lived this one. Good, ethical living leads upward toward positive realms (heavens or favourable rebirths), while negative actions can lead downward toward suffering states (hell realms, animal realm, hungry ghosts, and the realm of demons or asuras).

According to Theravāda teachings, there are 31 realms of existence:

- **26 Heavenly realms:** attainable through ethical living and good deeds.
- **Human realm:** where we currently reside, characterized by opportunities for spiritual growth.
- **Four lower realms:** Hell realms, hungry ghosts, animal realms, and asura realms, representing the consequences of negative karma.

Thus, death symbolizes the end of one chapter and the beginning of another. Living ethically ensures a positive transformation, while unethical actions lead to less fortunate states.

Mindfulness: The Essential Practice

Mindfulness ensures that we remain fully present, reducing the likelihood of harmful actions. Buddha reminded us to speak mindfully, as words carry immense power. They can heal or deeply harm. Before speaking, always consider whether your words are truthful, helpful, and compassionate. When in doubt, practice noble silence.

Understanding that death is inevitable inspires us to live morally, ethically, and compassionately each day. Mindfulness and ethical living guarantee peace and happiness, both now and at the moment of death.

Finally, consider the closeness of life and death. Buddha taught that life and death are separated by a single breath. To appreciate this vividly, hold your breath briefly—feel the urgency for air. This craving for breath symbolizes our natural desire for life. Life is fragile, precious, and brief. Rather than living anxiously, embrace each moment with mindfulness and gratitude.

My friends, each breath is a precious opportunity to live fully and compassionately. Reflecting regularly on impermanence helps us let go of attachments, reduces fear of death, and increases our appreciation for life.

Thank you all for listening today. May you carry these reflections into your daily life, living mindfully and facing each moment, including your last, with courage, compassion, and peace.

May you all be well, peaceful, and happy.

Namô Tassa Bhagavatô Arahātô Sammā Sambuddhassa

(Homage to the Blessed One, the Worthy One, the Fully Enlightened Buddha)

GOD'S GARDEN

God looked around His garden
And found an empty place.
He then looked upon the earth
And saw your tired face

He put His arm around you
And lifted you to rest.
God's garden must be beautiful
He always takes the best

He knew that you were suffering,
He knew you were in pain.
He knew that you would never
Get well on earth again.

He saw the road was getting rough,
And the hills were hard to climb.
So He closed your eyelids,
And whispered, "Peace be thine."

It broke our hearts to lose you,
But you didn't go alone.
For part of us went with you
The day God called you Home.

Gallery





