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# At the end of life

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**Abstract :** Midwife nurse, Nelly shares her actual experience of accompanying the dying. The end of life is a situation that generates anxiety for the patient and the family. Death scares, it is hardly representable. The accompaniment allows the dying to escape loneliness and live a close relationship until death. "Hear in depth what he says, welcome him within as much as he greets us. Life is here, flowing through our heart to his fingertips." Nelly also emphasizes the importance of listening: "We don't know, we listen, we listen to everything, we actually listen, we listen deeply: his words, his thoughts, his intonations." Importance of touching : "Offer a simple gesture: hold the hand, caress an arm, the back." She concludes by presenting the point of view and experience of the dying himself, in the light of Buddhist teaching.

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**THE END OF LIFE** : is a time of anguish for the family and the sick person. The anxiety is about the future, what will come next? Death frightens and can hardly be represented.

It can be imagined according to the convictions and beliefs, but there are no standard answers describing what happens after death.

The end of life is when one's health condition presents a rare and incurable disease in an advanced or final stage.

A very old person can be considered as being at the end of life.

**The end of life is a special time favourable to:**

Read over one's past,

Deepen and create bonds,

Receive or grant forgiveness,

Repent.

**A Buddhist monk said :**

The end of life results from the more or less rapid fading of the life force. Yet it doesn't imply automatically the lost of one's intelligence, self-consciousness and feelings. If we want the soothing religious message to be effective, one needs to convey it in such a manner that it is accepted despite the suffering of the agony. One person, feeling the humiliation of the pain, longs for a miracle that that would relieve her from her physical or moral sufferings. Only a humble carer can help achieving that.

**To give support** to a terminally-ill patient gives him the possibility to escape loneliness and to have a close communication bond until death parts.

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*2000 years ago, the Jewish philosopher, PHILON, wrote about the therapists of Alexandria :*

"You should provide the dying with the best conditions so that LIFE can act in him. It is thanks to his presence and interest for the other that the accompanying person can instil hope and receptiveness to life."

Taking care of the dying, not over stimulating him, but letting him emerge and greet him and what he wants, whether it is about "completing something", patching up with someone, or about telling how he wants to die.

Before opening for the first time this door to the unknown, one must cast aside his dualities in order to be one with the person he is about to meet.

"The volunteer accompanies life because he learns to become unified", says Philon. Released from dualities and the "pro or anti", he nurtures a keen sense of open mindedness.

Build trust and serenity while being genuine.

By letting himself go, the dying also draws us in that trust and respect.

The person at the end of her life needs to be loved in order to feel alive. The accompanying person gives her time, love and gentleness, not concerned with receiving any return.

Everyone has something to teach us, every event conveys a teaching.

The volunteer won't judge, nor will his eyes project his fears. He leaves his preconceived ideas and looks with the eyes of his heart, not with a short-sighted mind that keeps pondering and assessing.

He sees with lightening and receptive eyes, his is full **COMPASSION**.

Before opening that door, you need to leave behind social position and preconceived ideas, let go with daily concerns and worries, quieten the inner chatting.

Listen deeply to what he says, greet him inwardly like he receives you. Life is here, running through your heart to the tip of his fingers.

Respect what the other says, listen to the wealth he is sharing with you.

Understand what he understands, be humble, don't control but serve, don't know but listen.

This present moment is precious and accepting that death is part of it, seems to induce serenity.

As long as we are alive, we are not dead. To us who are accompanying, it is obvious that the person at the end of life is well alive, and we try to help her live at the best the present moment in a welcoming surrounding.

Accompany life with your humility, don't expect or pretend anything.

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The volunteer is not a nurse, he is there to provide his support, however little life the dying has left, it is his life.

### **LISTENING**

Remain neutral, don't try to impose anything, just listen.

Listen to the breath, the gaze and the words of the person you accompany.

Listen with creative, caring, sensitive, accurate, empathic, non-judgemental ears.

Listen, without anxiety, to the fear, anger, sadness, of the other.

We don't know, we listen, we listen to everything, we do really listen, we deeply listen to his words, his thoughts, his intonations.

*"Born with the other", said Claudel*

Resonate with him, let what he says echo in yourself, listen to his words, to himself, make it possible for him to release himself.

### **CONTACT**

Offer a simple gesture: hold a hand, caress the arms, the back. Touch this body, this hand that has a story to tell. Just be there, attentive to all his requests, more or less uttered.

Help him to express his emotions. Respect his will, his beliefs.

Perceive the spiritual world of the dying and also often, his spiritual agony when he goes through rebelling; ("why me?") and guilt ("I am paying for my mistakes ?")

### **A BUDDHIST MONK SAID :**

*"While accompanying the dying, the one holding the hand of the one who is leaving, offers him his faith, his reason, his progress in the learning of awakening, his inner peace. In return, the one who is leaving, whose hand is held, offers his suffering, his fears, his sorrows, and shows us the reality of our own future agony."*

### **SWEET GENTLE WORDS**

— Talk straight to the dying, don't address the others around, but talk only to him.

— Look for his eyes. If he can't communicate verbally or with his body, look all the more straight in his eyes. If he doesn't see and doesn't communicate, make sure he is "with you" by the contact, notice the changes in his breathing pace, his shivers, his skin vibrations. Go and fetch him wherever he is trapped in this body, comfort him.

### **THE DYING**

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is in the anxiety of a future, goes through moments of refusal or acceptance. He is faced with letting go with the past and greeting death that puts completion to life.

He takes a time in the present moment to untie the bonds holding him back to life.

*Four saving actions allowing to leave in peace*

Peace of mind occurs in every man when he is at peace with himself, and reconciled with everything that happened in his life. This is made easier when one has a natural longing for a better life, and for us, practitioners, by the concentration within meditation.

Therefore it is important :

1- *to express one's forgiveness (jap. shazai)* towards the ones who hurt us, since holding grudge against someone, or hatred, are still ways of keeping a grip on this world. Such attachments impede from realizing a peaceful mind that should come along the cessation of all biological functions.

2- *to express repentance (jap. sange)* enables to cleanse one's mind by being aware of the consequences of one's actions.

3 - *Let one's longing for awakening flow freely (jap. Hotsu bodaishin)*. It can be realized even by a non-Buddhist, since it is longing for the highest form of spiritual life. It is a matter of choosing the right wording.

4- If it is all right, *practise meditation (sanzen)*, as Buddha Shakyamuni did at the moment of his own death.

### **Meditation practice according to one's beliefs**

In order to help a dying lying in his bed to meditate, invite him to recite a mantra silently, a prayer, bring to his sight a holly image or a statue of Buddha, so that he can lay his eyes upon it, or touch it with his hand or lips.

Show him how to do it so he can imitate you.

If Buddhism invites us to reflect on the physical death that awaits us, it refers above all to spiritual death. If we are not alert, we are already dead :

*« Vigilance is the path leading to Eternal Life. Inattention is the path leading to death. The ones who are vigilant don't die, the ones who are inattentive are already dead. »* (Dhammapada 21)

Vigilance, the discipline of the mind, the control of the thinking process, as the Buddha reminded it in many sutras, is the gate to eternity.

Our life and our death occur here and now, in a here and now that determines how we will meet our departure hour from this world. That is the priceless teaching of Buddhism.