
Questions about life and death

Combined summaries of training days with Roland Yuno Rech in Pegomas (November 2012) and Grube Louise (January 2013)

Abstract : Roland Yuno Rech's introduction aims at recalling the fundamentals of the Buddha's teaching concerning life and death, based on few sutras. He also highlights what is universal in the teaching of Buddha, what is beyond Buddhism and that which can be of help and relief to all the dying, regardless of their religious beliefs and faiths. Finally, he puts forward some qualities that can guide a bodhisattva when accompanying a dying, ... as a consciousness-raiser.

I'll introduce this subject by bringing to mind the essentials of Buddha's teachings on life and death on the basis of few sutras. I will also highlight some qualities of approaches, which can guide the bodhisattvas in accompanying the dying. Next, I will pass on the hand to the various speakers who will share their personal experience in this field.

We should bear in mind that in our society most of the people we might accompany aren't Buddhists. Therefore the central thread introducing this topic is the following question: "What, in the teaching of the Buddha and in the teaching of the practice of Zen, is universal enough and useful to anyone who will inevitably be concerned one day or another, with the question of death?"

Death

If the question of death is fundamental and proper to human beings, it is simply because any human being is aware of existing as a separate entity, as an ego, as a "me". Inevitably, he becomes conscious of the impermanence and fragility of this "me" and perhaps, if he is quite engaged on the Way, he is aware that this « me » is merely a mental construction. In any case, he knows he is mortal. This awareness has led men to develop beliefs to answer these questions basically unanswered: - "What happens after death?" - "Is there something happening after death?"

No life, no death

We can't talk about death without talking about life, in Buddhism we speak only about life and death. One doesn't exist without the other, therefore we always embrace both aspects: life and death. Death doesn't exist by itself. In order to die one must be alive. Only the living die, therefore we can only speak of life and death, not just about death in itself.

Awareness of impermanence: starting point of Buddhism

The starting point of Shakyamuni Buddha's quest, was his awareness of impermanence, triggered by his four famous encounters: a sick person, an old man, a corpse about to be incinerated, and, finally, an ascetic who showed great serenity. This was the starting point of his quest since his sudden encounter with impermanence and death gave him the impression that

life was meaningless. What meaning could be found if we were all to get sick and die? What life meant if we were bound to lose those we loved, if life was a life of sufferings? Thus he engaged the spiritual way to sort out this issue, to release himself from this suffering.

By the way, let's note that in doing so he acted as any Hindu. Indeed, in India at the time, being born was not a happy event and life on this earth was generally considered as samsara: a place where one is born to systematically experience suffering when faced with impermanence. And the earliest one is released from it, the best! And most religious beliefs and practices at the time of the Buddha were intended to free oneself from the samsara, from birth and death.

The Buddha was no exception and he engaged in a practice that eventually resulted in zazen. If the starting point of Buddhism is the confrontation with the prospect of death, we can see that the Buddha turned this perspective where death, instead of making life absurd, could, on the contrary, help us discover life's deepest meaning and help us awaken to reality.

In this case, we can say that accompanying the dying is the concern of everybody, because we are all dying since we were born. We can add that everyone needs to be accompanied on the path of Awakening, the discovery path of the Ultimate reality that gives life its full meaning and makes one drop any regret of having to die sooner or later. As Kodo Sawaki put it: "Practice the Way so that you won't have regrets when you die."

Awakening of the Buddha and themes related to death

Buddha said how he awakened and we are going to see in the various aspects of Shakyamuni's awakening, which are the themes related to death.

Rebirths: When he realized awakening, the Buddha first visualized his previous lives, one likely to be a bodhisattva life.

Buddha was born in the 5th century BC, in a culture and a context where most people believed in rebirth and samsara, consequently, a lot of his teachings address this point. But the general belief in a samsara, as a succession of rebirths, was clearly experienced by the Buddha when he saw that his life wasn't unique and was part of a cycle.

That experience shifts completely the prospect of being bound to die if we think that this predictable death is only a step rather than the end of everything. And I think most religions view death as a stage and thus not at all as the very end of all existences.

It is interesting to bear in mind that the belief in rebirth was not limited to the Hindu culture. Contemporary with the Buddha, Plato believed strongly in rebirths. Besides, it has been a general belief also in the Western world for a thousand years. This belief was also present among the early Christians and was maintained until the 6th century AD, up to the Second Council of Constantinople, an ecumenical council convened in 553 by the Emperor Justinian, which declared it heretical and abolished it.

But to that time, since Platonic philosophy greatly influenced early Christianity, the idea of rebirth was quite sustainable. Plato illustrated the oblivion of our past lives by a myth. According to the latter, the dead crossed the famous River Pli, called "Lethe" the river of Oblivion at the origin of the word "lethargy". Lethargy is an unconscious stage close to death

wherein one forgets everything that happened and is no longer aware of anything. This is why, like Platon, we can believe in successive lives without being surprised not to remember our past lives.

However, at the time of Buddha, (and even nowadays), there were all sort of different schools and different ways of addressing life and death. There were also people who were quite materialistic or sceptical. If you happen to accompany fully atheistic and materialistic people, to whom death is the end of everything, there is a good way to remove their fear of dying: the Epicurus way. Epicurus taught to be quite consistent: if one believes that there is nothing after death, there is no reason to worry! Death releases from all sufferings and is followed by an absolute and concernless peace. Of course one can regret he will lose all the sources of joy, pleasure, happiness he had in this life. Maybe this sorrow will make him consider Buddha's wisdom to address his fear.

Thus, Buddha realized that we are reborn according to our karma, that our existence in this world is conditioned by our past karma. "Karma" means an action and its consequences. "Actions" imply physical actions, thoughts and words. And the karma is the result of the bonnos, mainly the Three major Poisons, which, somehow summarize all bonnos, i.e: ignorance, greed and hatred. And nirvana, the extinction of the causes of suffering, is realized, understood as the cessation of these Three Poisons.

I think all that is universally common. It is true that all beings suffer from their ignorance of not understanding the meaning of life, feeling the existence is absurd, meaningless. Also, and above all, we suffer from ignoring what can bring true happiness in our life: to be able to live truly in harmony with what we are profoundly, to live with the reality of our existence and to live in an awakened manner.

I think that as long as we don't realize that, we try all kinds of sources of satisfaction and pursue all sorts of objects of desire. And of course these objects can't fulfil our fundamental longing for profound realization. They are all disappointing and don't solve the problem of dukkha, the source of suffering. And what's more, they cause hatred and hostility vis-à-vis all that impede the satisfaction of our desires.

Then, the belief in rebirth is something that poses question to us, practitioners of the Buddha Way. Indeed, there are hardly few people who have actually experienced their past lives. Some try, through therapeutic approaches of "rebirths", to regress into past lives in order to find the cause of their current difficulties. But Buddha never advised us to do so! Based on what he saw and experienced, he taught us that we inherit our past karmas. But unlike the approach of "rebirth", one must try to solve his karma in the here and now, not by going back into the past. The whole teaching of the Buddha, as of Zen teaching, is not at all aiming at looking to the past to solve problems related to the past, it is definitely a teaching on the here and now. As to past karma, all we can do is repenting, but there is no need, nor does it matter, for trying to trace past actions to fix them. Obviously, if we have committed evil deeds in this life, the least we can do about it is to repent.

In the context of accompanying the dying, I think that inciting or encouraging repentance is extremely important. It should be clear that repentance isn't about guilt but it raises awareness of past errors and induces the firm resolution to address them here and now. We can repent

until the last moment and repentance is the best way to cleanse past karma and soothe the mind here and now, since repentance truly implies awareness, which will enable us to let go. If we simply suppress or repress everything that was wrong in our life, without proper awareness and without repenting, we can't be at peace at the time of death.

The Four Noble Truths

Shakyamuni taught the Four Noble Truths, the first two truths consist in diagnosing suffering and its causes, but the last two raise the possibility to heal suffering and despair caused by the lack of meaning of life, and that there is a possible path. We shouldn't think that it is too late for the seriously ill, the path might be very short.

The path Buddha described has three main aspects: *Kai jo e*: the ethics: do not do evil, do only good, and do good for others. These are the three basic precepts followed afterwards by all the other precepts.

I believe that a dying can do a great deal of good to people around him, there is the whole nursing team, the family visiting him, all his friends, etc. He still can help others by his own set of mind, his sharing of experience, and by his practice of the three pure precepts. And even in the very last moments of his life, he can still ponder: "How can I act in order not to hurt, to cause suffering to others, how can I do them good?" Also, for instance, by stitching up with his enemies, (should he have any). Indeed, forgiving people who hurt you, release them from the remorse of letting you die with the suffering they caused you. Practising for others makes the dying feel he still can be useful, instead of feeling like a burden, apologetic for the concerns he causes to his family and to everybody. We can shift that around by showing a sick or dying that he can be of great help to others, he can give a fair amount just by his attitude. Even the severely sick and dying can make huge gifts.

The other aspect is Jo, concentration, called zazen.

Generally, people think that you need to be fit to sit in lotus, half lotus, or sit on a chair. And they think that if the body is in a bad shape, if someone is ill and lying in bed, it is impossible for him to do zazen. But "Zazen, as Master Dogen said, doesn't depend on the sitting posture."

Obviously the sitting posture is the best, but even in a wheel chair, in bed, one can practise zazen, for the essence of zazen is to be totally, body and mind, in oneness. Even when dying we still have a body and a mind! Thus, as long as we have a body and a mind and that we breath, we can concentrate and be totally present here and now to the sensations, perceptions, and observe all phenomena appearing and disappearing in the mind and learn to let them pass. We can always learn to know ourselves since all phenomena we meet are koans and opportunities to awaken. Thus even ill in a hospital bed, we can practise the way of Zen.

One with each breath is eternity by the second.

And even if we accompany non-Buddhists, or non-Zen practitioners, there are still some helpful things we can teach or show them. For instance instead of loathing their sick body, they should try to inhabit that body the best they can, as it is. We can help the very sick and the dying, by teaching them to release their tensions, to relax and concentrate each moment on each breath without thinking of something else. If we do that, it's a good opportunity to let go with a great

deal of attachments and causes of suffering. It is also the opportunity to experience the only form of eternity a human being can live when truly body and mind in unity with what is here and now: it is each moment's worth. There is no need to say: "This is Zen, Buddhism..." simply that there is a way to lessen the pain. "I am going to show you how you can breath and I am going to accompany you when you breath."

Of course in such state of mind, it is not required to reflect on the Buddha or on the Four Noble Truths, all it takes is to focus on the observation of what is happening moment by moment to be aware that what goes on, goes by. Everything is impermanent: we can harmonize with that by realizing a mind that isn't attached to all phenomena popping up. Managing to be both fully aware of what appears and, at the same time, completely in the letting go. If one manages to practise that just for a day, that day is worth 100 years spent in pursuing illusions!

The Twelve interdependent causations – The 12 *innen*

In a sutra, someone asked Buddha: - "Are we responsible for our own suffering?" It refers to the issue of responsibility. Generally, people who are ill, who are about to die, who have a cancer, or psychosomatic illnesses, tend to feel guilty and try to understand the meaning of their illness. Most of the time, they believe they are the ones to be blamed for being ill, they try to retrace when they had it wrong. We believe we are the authors of our own karma, and we are to be held responsible for our illness and eventually for our death. Of course it just adds additional suffering: "Not only am I ill but I am to be blamed for that!"

Buddha's teaching is far from that. In a sutra he was asked: "Who is the author of suffering, is it the individual? He answered: - No!" If it is not oneself, there must be some other causes. "Does suffering have no causes? He said: - No!" He eventually said: - "It is only the 12 interdependent causes which are responsible."

In Buddha's teaching, there was simultaneously to the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, the teaching of the twelve interdependent causes, the twelve *innen*. I think this teaching is extremely precious, it is what the Buddha named the "Middle Path", and it gets to the question of karma and past lives, subsequent lives and emptiness. It is the key to all things connected to life and death.

How can you explain that to a person who is sick or about to pass away?

Buddha put it shortly: "When this is, that is, when this is not, that is not."

It means that there is always a causal relationship: all phenomena are caused to exist because of something else. And thus, understanding that each thing is interdependent of something else, of other beings, of the fundamental cosmic energy, of the whole universe, means that "I" doesn't exist as a separate entity. It implies that at birth, it is not "me", or a "soul" that is born, and when dying it is not "me" that passes away. Because "me" is not "me", "me" is the whole universe. Thus what is happening at birth or when dying, is a transformation process of the cosmic energy. By observing our own life and death in such manner, our mind opens to a much wider perspective, with far less attachment to our little ego, and in the end, it is the realization of the Awakening.

What we call emptiness - as it is said in the Hannya Shingyo, the teaching of the Bodhisattva of Compassion on the Great Wisdom, *Prajna*- requires to understand that all phenomena are *ku*, emptiness. Emptiness is not nothingness, but according to emptiness, everything exist only as a result of a succession of interdependent or interrelated causes.

It is what mothers practise, when their baby cries and feels pain, by saying: "It is nothing". "It is nothing" is *ku*, "Don't cry", and usually they add: „It will pass!“ And it is true! In the end, mothers are all like Kannon! If it passes, it is precisely because nothing has any substance, thus everything transforms itself and even pain, illness will also pass, if only because we are going to die.

Such way of seeing death is neither nihilist nor eternal, it comes from a perpetual process of transformation, a constant evolving on a relative or surface level of reality. But in the ultimate reality, in depth, it implies that there is no substance whatever. And in particular, no substance of an ego because everything called "ego", "me", "personality" which we assign some form of permanence to. Substance or eternity, are merely productions of the working of this interdependence.

No being endowed with proper substance makes transformation possible, since nothing is set, everything is in a constant evolving. Nagarjuna strongly emphasized that point. Practising the Four Noble Truths, Buddha Dharma, the Eightfold Paths would be meaningless, even liberation would be meaningless if all existing things were substantial and permanent. It would imply for instance that suffering would be permanent and wouldn't be caused. Without a cause, it would be substantial! It would exist as an entity named "suffering" that would exist forever and wouldn't ever be solved. Likewise, if an elusive "self" was to exist on a permanent base, it couldn't ever release itself from delusions.

On a Mahayana Buddhist and a Zen perspective, nirvana is not a cessation of all forms of existences; it is rather the cessation of existence as a cause of suffering. This point is utterly appropriate to the accompaniment of the dying.

Death it not the end of everything

Death is not the end of everything; that is the pivotal point. When someone is born, he is born from a past life; the cause of his birth is the past life and thus the previous death.

So, what happens from one death to a new birth, isn't the survival of an individual soul, it is the continuation of a succession of causations, or a succession of causes and effects, as a sort of wave beam propagating itself while not remaining alike throughout its progression. However, there is a cause-effect relation between the spirit of the person who passes away, and the spirit of the person who is conceived and about to be born. And this causal link isn't produced by an immortal soul leaving a dead corpse and entering a body to be born, but it is the work of a spirit. This is very hard to prove scientifically, at least for the time being, but it would be a spirit that, while not being substantial and thus permanent, would be like a wave beam that would extend itself into some causal chain that would entail a new birth. There is a kind of energy, a consciousness that was once attached to life and which wants to live again for all sorts of reasons. Perhaps also we want to continue to live because we realize we haven't achieved what is essential, and that we should be born again in order to awaken, at last.

In any case, there is some energy, desire to live, which is one of the ring of the chain of the twelve interdependent causes (12 *innen*), provoking a new birth. And what determines the quality or nature of this new birth - besides the past karma of the person who passes away - and in a much more determining manner- is the last thought conceived just before dying. It is one of the reasons why Buddhists believe that the dying should be let in peace as much as possible letting them have the best thoughts the moment they pass away, in order to be born again in the best possible conditions, for this last thought will be decisive for what will come next. The last thought of a bodhisattva is neither about nirvana nor about the final extinction, but it is to be born again in the best conditions to be able to help suffering people. And insofar as one is able to make such vow from the bottom of the heart, he has already realized nirvana. For then, the bodhisattva is already released from a choosy ego that wants this and not that, is attached to its pleasures, etc. And then there is nothing here such as sacrifice or renunciation on the part of the bodhisattva. There is merely the continuation of *bodaishin*, the awakening mind that will embody one form or another in a new existence, wherever that will be...

As to the influence of the karma regarding rebirths, generally the consolation for Buddhists is to consider: "I did good deeds in this life, thus I will certainly have a good new birth." It is a comforting thought we can submit when accompanying a Buddhist, reminding him of his life-long good practice and that he is bound to have a good rebirth and thus he shouldn't worry about the future. It is a teaching Buddha often expounded: "If you lead a righteous life, you will have a good rebirth."

Even though, it wasn't his ultimate teaching at all. The ultimate teaching of Buddha was not about being born again. Not to be born again at all is to stop the samsara or transmigration cycle. The ultimate meaning of the Buddha's teaching is to abandon the ego, attached to the merits, to a good karma, hoping to exist on as an individual entity. And even if this theory on the merits exists, the ultimate teaching of the Buddha is *mushotoku*, that is to say, a teaching on liberation, a teaching on letting go. At the same time, it is realizing that, in the end, there is nothing to let go. Letting go is possible because there is nothing to let go! Nobody lets go, otherwise letting go wouldn't be possible. We would try to get rid of something that would stick to our fingers, it would belong to us so tightly that it's riddance would be impossible! And since nothing belongs to us, including a bad karma, we can let go. And finally, this is the ultimate teaching of the Buddha on the moment of dying: to realize this letting go.

Difference between suffering and pain

Pain is related to a direct cause: we feel physical pain, when we are wounded, as a consequence of a severe illness such as cancer. Illnesses often entail pains and physiological reactions. The response of the nervous system and the sensitivity organs produce pain. And even an Arhat, who has realized nirvana during his lifetime, will feel pain anyway and will have to go through the throes of illness, aging and death.

Suffering is something much more moral or psychological, which may be the failure to bear the pain, and makes one say: "This is unfair, why does it happen to me, what have I done to deserve such a pain?"

All moral sufferings caused by jealousy, envy and fears of losing something dear to us, etc., are expressions of suffering, that is to say something produced by the mind. It is the ego that

provokes suffering because it doesn't accept impermanence, neither the reality as it is. So it keeps bumping against this reality, rebels and creates suffering. In Buddhism it is called *dukkha*, though *dukkha* encompasses both pain and suffering. But in *dukkha*, one should distinguish the different levels of suffering or pain. I would rather say that there is a "basic level" of suffering which boils down to pain only, and there is "secondary level" which has to do with the attitude, the bearing, what one makes out of the pain. If the latter gets transformed into suffering, that's to say into ruminations, revolt, refusal, non acceptance, all that add up more pain. As soon as the ego interferes, it becomes suffering. Here is a very good way to sum things up: it is the ego that produces suffering by not accepting the reality as it is.

Being not awakened provokes suffering, or, all the way round, suffering is the result from not being awakened.

Pain, everybody has pain, even a Buddha can have pain. Upon dying, the Buddha suffered from dysentery, which had to be painful, but he didn't turn it into suffering, he accepted it. And when his disciples felt sorry for him or regretted he was going to die, he told them: "But I always told you that this body is impermanent, and there is only one thing to do about it, it is to accept it."

Shakyamuni's sutras relevant for accompanying the dying: commentaries

Visakha sutra

In this sutra, a woman has just lost her daughter, when she is told her daughter is dead, she is in a state of shock, leaps out her bath and runs to meet Buddha. Buddha sees her coming water dripping from her hair and clothes, completely upset. "My very dear elder daughter has just died!"

We are going to see how the Buddha addressed this situation, it is quite interesting.

He told her: -"Vishakha, would you like to have as many children and grandchildren as the inhabitants of this town of Savatthi? She answers: -Yes, I would like to have as many children and grandchildren as there are people in this town. Then Buddha asked her: - Do you know how many inhabitants die each day in this town?"

And gradually she realized that at least one person passes away every single day.

-"So, he said, when that person dies, do you rush to see me, in the great emotional state you are now? – No –Then, if you're in this great suffering for the death of your daughter it is because you were very attached to her. You should know that those who prefer a hundred people have hundred reasons to grief. Those who have two favourite people, have two main causes of grief, those who have one favourite person, have one cause of grief, those who have no favourite person, have no sorrow. Thus, I say that those who have no favourite people, are also without grief and feel serene."

And he concluded that all afflictions and lamentations from the different sufferings of this world do occur because of passionate attachments. Then he broadens the perspective by saying: "Finally, without things or people you want to be yours, grief won't occur. Those who are so liberated are released from grief, because in the world they have nothing that is

preferred. And then, with the hope of achieving the state without grief and suffering, one should be without preferences towards the whole world."

This immediately recalls the first verse of the first Zen teaching of the *Shin shin mei* "Entering the Way is not difficult, but there should be neither love, nor hatred, nor choice, nor rejection." In other words: no preference.

Obviously it hurts your sensitivity, "No favourite person!" It is the teaching of Buddha, and the teaching of the *Shin shin mei*, and the teaching of Zen!

"*Shin jin datsu raku*": Body and mind cast away, is to abandon any mind of preference for oneself or for others, to abandon the attachment to oneself. "I am my own love object", is the basic attachment.

Now you react by saying : "This is so icely cold!" Wisdom is so different from the human way of responding, so it sounds cold. Yet, Dogen teaches the exact same thing, it is not only Shakyamuni; all masters from the transmission say exactly the same thing. If you find that icy, you should get used to this icy atmosphere. But if you read Dogen's poetry, as well as other Buddhists, you will see that they were not cold at all, they were even very sensitive. In his most famous poem, when Dogen looked at the moon he loved: "The moon is beautiful tonight, but why does it keep me awake?" That's because he was in great sadness because he knew he would soon never see again the autumn moon.

So, even if he had realized awakening, release, taught emptiness, it didn't prevent him from preferring the moon, because he loved the moon. Similarly, when he says in the *Genjo Koan*: "Even if you like flowers, they fall into our regrets (in the middle of our grief). "

It means that the other side of our apparent coldness, is acceptance of our human feelings, that's to say that human emotions are natural too, and that we should accept to experience sadness and regrets. Our practice also includes accepting the great difficulty as a human being to accept death, it is the extra step one needs to take to achieve true wisdom.

Marana Bhaya Sutra: Sutra about "the fear of death"

In short: Someone asks whether there is anyone who is not afraid of death. Buddha replied (approximately): "Some people are afraid of death while others are not. Those who are afraid are those who are not liberated from their passions, not freed from their cravings, their affections, their thirst, etc. And those who do not fear death are those who haven't committed evil deeds, and who are released from their attachments, especially, from their doubts, passions, cravings and thirst."

Those who are released from the passions and attachment to the body, are not afraid of death. Those who have not committed demeritorious deeds, that is to say, that did not create suffering to others, who have always acted wholesomely in their lives, have no fear of death.

A very important point in accompanying the dying is to remind them of all the good they have done in their lives. This is a great consolation to realize that this life was not vain. Because everyone has been also good in his life, and inevitably it will have good effects.

The fourth category of people who do not fear death are those who have no doubts. Indeed, they have sufficiently reflected on the meaning of life to be clear, and therefore they have no doubt.

Gilana Sutra, the four subjects of consolation

The interlocuter, Mahanama, is a lay disciple, and he says he has never heard Buddha speak about how to accompany the dying, or that he didn't often talk about it. Indeed, though odd enough, Buddha often considered things revolving around death as matters for laymen.

Let's note that Buddha was not interested in the dying or death, he was interested in life! And even with respect to his own death, he told his disciples: "Do not waste time doing ceremonies for my death, focus on practising the Dharma!" The paradox is that today, the practice of the monks in Japan, consists in performing ceremonies for the dead, it became the opposite!

The Buddha said (roughly): "Monks, you need to focus on the practice and the teaching of the Dharma, it is your role, and funerals are to console families and relatives but it is a matter of laymen. "

Remember that rituals around death are intended to transfer merits to the dying so that they are endowed with the most favourable assets for a good rebirth.

Buddha mainly taught life. He did not speak much of accompanying the dying but all his teaching was an accompaniment to live well and therefore to die well, to solve the problem of death.

So, "How to accompany the dying?" is part of the teaching of "How to live well until the end?" And precisely in this sutra, Buddha answers Mahanama who asks:

- "How should we accompany a dying person? He told him: - Mahanama, a lay disciple, intelligent, who is dying and suffering seriously, should be relieved by another disciple by the four following subjects of consolation:

- "Remain endowed with the confidence in Buddha." And thus as to a Christian, one could tell him "Remain endowed with the confidence in Jesus Christ."

Then, he explained why: because the Buddha has realized awakening, that he is unexcelled as a trainer of human beings, etc. - "Remain endowed with the confidence in the Dharma." The Dharma or other doctrine according to the teaching, religion one has received.

Accompanying a dying in this case, is not only about reminding him of his beliefs, his faith, practice, which will provide him some support. We must continue the practice until the end. When time of death is drawing near, don't believe there is nothing more to be done. In fact, I even think these times probably to achieve the deepest awareness, particularly for those who practice the Buddha Dharma.

- "Remain endowed with the confidence in the Sangha." Or else: "Remain endowed with the Church, the religious community you belong to." And then "... with those four subjects, a lay disciple must comfort another dying disciple."

But let's say the latter still worries about something else. There is a whole set of causes, if you worry about your mother, your father, others... Buddha says: - "You are bound to die, whether you worry or not about your mother, father, you are to die one day."

And he addresses other sources of concern with the same perspective: "Whether you worry or not, you are to die anyway!"

As to emotions, obviously, you can't help worrying. But there is such a truth in what Buddha said that indeed it may help alleviating concerns and avoiding some more. And it's the same thing if you like flowers, even if you love them, they will fade eventually, and "fall into our regrets." We feel regret, but this regret decreases; it becomes an acceptable human emotion.

Likewise even if worrying for others is natural, a dying often seeks to comfort others for he doesn't like to see other suffering and worrying about him.

Why "encouraging him not to worry about his parents, his children, his desires he won't longer meet"? - Because all of that is impermanent. So the dying is profoundly undergoing impermanence. He dies, there is suffering, but basically there is no substance to it. Obviously, when someone who practices the Buddha Way hears that, he will be immediately reminded of everything he has practiced throughout his life, and it may awaken him. But someone who has never practised, will rather ask himself whether you don't make fun of him: "This is nothing? How come?!"

Afterwards, Buddha goes on about the cravings, and he says: - "You have cravings for the five sensual pleasures but the desires for spiritual states are so superior, you'd better give up these desires and long for those spiritual states."

And the conclusion of the Buddha when someone tells you - "I no longer want this condition because I set my mind in the world of Brahma. " (Brahma is the greatest god).

In this case, this person should be advised the following: - "But dear friend, even the happiness of Brahma world is impermanent, it has an end, and the existence in the world of Brahma is that of a prisoner in this world of greed, of the ego. "

In Buddhism, many Buddhists wish to be reborn in a state of deity in Brahma's world. But even Brahma was considered by the Buddha as someone in the illusion by considering himself to be eternal though he was not, believing to be the creator of the world when he was not... Simply because his long life deceived him, made him forget he was born once and would have a death.

What makes one wish to exist in these very happy worlds? It is the attachment to the ego that no longer wants to enjoy worldly desires but spiritual bliss. And this is why Buddha said: - "But even the happiness in the world of Brahma is like a prisoner of individuality."

In other words, it would be good for you if you could stop longing for Brahma's world and if you could direct your thoughts to the cessation of individuality, that is to say the abandonment of the ego. This comes to what is known in Zen as: "*Shin jin datsu raku*": to abandon body and mind.

If the dying says: - "I led my thoughts to the complete cessation of individuality." - "In this case this lay disciple, says Buddha, is freed from all defilements. Between him and a monk who has achieved the same liberation, there is no difference. "

This liberation, taught by the Buddha, has often been considered to be reserved for religious, monks, people who dedicated their lives to the Way... No! Buddha said that everyone is entitled to this release, anyone who has abandoned the attachment to the ego, is similar to a great

monk and even to Buddha himself. And basically, this is the essence of what is taught through the practice of zazen. Zen practice is to learn to know yourself and getting to know yourself is learning to forget yourself.

For twenty-five centuries, the teachings on suffering, sickness, old age, death, have been teachings to encourage us to let go of our selfishness and our attachment to our little person.

I think all religions teach exactly the same thing. When Christianity is taught, we are also taught that we are a creature of God, it is then an invitation to let go of our selfishness. The *pai* (prostrations) Muslims do five times a day, are like constant invitations to let go of the ego in favour of what is beyond. And the meaning of life from the perspective of religions is to contact the dimension of this vast existence in itself, beyond the ego. The teaching of Zen and all religions, is basically to make this opening possible.

And as to conclude this part, here is what a participant said about the "icy" aspect of Buddha's teaching. She has an incurable disease and her days are numbered.

- "I thought my sufferings were like a glacier but these words, this teaching is like the sun that melts the ice!"

So if sometimes there is a steep side in the teaching of Zen or Buddhism, it is a teaching based on compassion to help beings to actually end their suffering.

So everything I just talked about, all what the Buddha taught, is something universal. These are things that may be shown, taught, without referring to Buddhism, to people who are seriously ill and may die, simply because, it deeply corresponds to human nature, called the Buddha nature, which is universal. Although we are engaged in a school of Buddhism Zen Soto, what we experience is so universal that it can help all beings, even if they are not engaged in that belief.

Qualities of accompanying bodhisattvas

Without encroaching too much on the personal presentations and interventions, here are some qualities or attitudes, which can help the bodhisattvas in accompanying the dying.

Motivation

It is important to have clarified one's own position in relation to death. I think that sometimes what lies behind a desire to accompany the dying, is also a desire to resolve one's own problems, anxieties and questions about death. In that case, it is the dying who teaches those who are accompanying, and then the accompaniment provides an opportunity to reflect and reassure oneself about what will happen at the time of death.

In this case, I think it is not very good to use the dying to elaborate a philosophy on death. It's better to have first clarified one's own position in order not to be in a kind of anguished request or concern as to death. I think we should try to have our ideas as clear as possible, including having no idea, even being skeptical or agnostic...

Respect of the diversity of beliefs

Insofar as our vocation is spiritual guidance, and there is a spiritual dimension when it comes to dying, it is essential to take into account the cultural context and beliefs of people we want to help. When people are ill and they are to die soon, it is time to remember their religious beliefs. Their problems and difficulties related to the disease can be transformed into opportunities to deepen their own spiritual grounds. I don't think we should accompany Christians by encouraging them to understand the teaching of Buddha, on the contrary they should be encouraged to deepen the teaching of the Christ, which will help them to die.

It implies to develop a religious culture and get acquainted with the bases of different religions in order to support better each one according to his or her beliefs. We must learn the beliefs and understandings about life and death for a Muslim, a Christian, a Jew in order to be able to remind an important point that can support him in his journey.

I think we can do it from the practice of zazen, because zazen helps us to rediscover the essence of the religious spirit, beyond the different religions. Generally speaking, a good thing for all teachers is to deepen and learn about different religious beliefs so as to greet all kinds of people in a dojo, and be able to show how the practice zazen can help everyone to deepen and understand better his own religion.

And I want to add that, in general, even when dealing with people in the prime of life, you should never want to preach the Dharma. We are not people who should preach, but people awoken enough to seize the opportunity to allow someone to be aware of something.

Try to be consciousness-raiser

If the faith is not clearly defined, again do not teach Buddhism, but, get people, as much as possible, and if their condition allows it, with questions or few words, to reflect on what the meaning of existence is for them. We must try to help them clarify what they believe, in order to help them be more unified, consistent with what they believe. A manner to help people could be to question them in a "Socratic" way: not to tell them what we think, or what is good, what is right, what is true etc., but in a way that gradually brings the person to find out by herself.

Also, accompanying people who have led a very materialistic life, and who tell themselves: "Since I can no longer enjoy life, life is not worth living anymore, help me to leave as soon as possible." The religious view, including someone who practices the Buddha Dharma, is to see the opportunity to help the person to realize that all the values on which his or her life was based, were non-values, or values rather impermanent, rather inconsistent. And it can be an opportunity for a change to realize that there is something else that could be done in the time that person has left.

And since the meaning of life is manifested at every moment in the reality we live in, I think it is quite possible, even for someone who has never practised, to awaken even just a few minutes before his death, if the person confronts fundamental questions: "Who am I?" „What is this life?"

If we deeply question the reality of this existence, inevitably, we will encounter something like or in the range of the awakening of Buddha, because we are already that reality, each of us.

There is only one way to awaken: it is by abandoning the ego.

And actually, accompaniment does not even depend on the religion of the sick; it could just be helping people to give up their ego. Not by injunctions, but an accompaniment that makes one aware of the vanity of the ego, its emptiness and thus the possibility of another state of consciousness, called "nirvana" in Buddhism. It is a state of consciousness that is free from all suffering associated with this attachment to individuality, to an ego.

And thus, one must have a deep trust in the Dharma and in the fact that everyone can awaken, can free himself. We share all the same reality of interdependence, the existence as it is, therefore there is always a possibility to awaken. And this awakening is extremely liberating compared to the poisons of life, or compared to samsara, which from the perspective of the Buddhism of the Great Vehicle, is not a place of rebirth but a state of being. And you can pass from samsara to nirvana from one moment to the next, in the course of this lifetime.

I think if we see that, we have the faith that awakening is possible to the last moment. And it doesn't necessarily require many years of practice, or existences of practice, but it can happen in a fleeting moment before dying. So it's worth accompanying people, even if they seem far from that, and it implies to invest to the very end, trying to be a consciousness-raiser.

Dogen said: "Better to live one day awakened than a hundred years in the illusion." So even if we have only one day to live, that day could be more important than all the years before!

Of course, it rarely happens, but it happens, and our role is to encourage that to happen.

Empathy and open-mindedness

One should say the things that can be heard, it implies an extraordinary empathy. And empathy, I believe, is one of the fundamental qualities when accompanying all living beings throughout all their situations. It is a quality usually developed by the practice of zazen. In the sense that in zazen we start by "empathizing" with ourselves when we become aware of all the causes of suffering, these bonnos present in us like the seeds of all the human sufferings. Familiarizing ourselves with our own bonnos, our own causes of suffering, is the ideal breeding ground of empathy.

Someone who would never suffer, who wouldn't have bonnos, when seeing people suffering as a result of their bonnos, would say: "They are a little bit crazy, they are not normal!" And he would laugh at them or would tend to criticize them instead of empathizing with them. While if on the contrary, we have a practice that makes us extremely attentive to all causes of suffering we have ourselves, even if we seek to repress or ignore them, seeds are there, popping out from time to time, and it helps empathizing with others who are suffering.

And then, to empathize with others, we must not be too crowded by our own bonnos and own karmic consequences. There is no need to be totally awakened and released, yet clear and broad-minded enough to have room to greet others. People who have a head full of worries do not listen to you, nor do they see you. They are locked in their little ego.

So it means that before going to a dying, practising zazen is fundamental to strip from any concern left. It is important not to show up to a sick person with the mind full of worries and

almost with the eye set on the clock: "I still have this problem to solve and I still have to take care of him." So you must be available, I believe that the practice of zazen can help with that.

Be yourself

The greatest help we can give is our own way of being, our vibrations. If someone says nice things but feels anxious, and tries to hide that anxiety behind a long preaching, whatever she will say won't have any soothing effect. So we accompany with our own reality, with our deep inner self. I think that even on the point of dying, the peaceful vibrations of someone serene about the matter of death will also help pacifying the dying.