
UNDERSTANDING DEATH AND DYING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM WITH AN EMPHASIS ON SCHOLARSHIP FROM MYANMAR

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ABSTRACT

This article is an investigation of ideas concerning death and dying in the context of Theravada Buddhism. It draws especially from scholarship in Myanmar. Both physical Death and the process of dying can be understood as products of impermanence. The Pali canon while recognizing that death is beyond understanding in ordinary language, understands death from the concept of continuity. Myanmar scholars have understood the dying process in Buddhism as involving mental processes and consciousness. Death is a stage in the process which extends to the next life. They therefore place an emphasis on the importance of consciousness prior to death. The ultimate goal is deathlessness or Nibbana which is achieved with the help of meditation.

Keywords: Death, Dying, Buddhism, Nibbana, Myanmar

Death and Dying in Buddhist Texts

Marana in both Sanskrit and Pali is a term for death. In Buddhist thought, this has two senses. (1) Physical death as it occurs at the end of life: in this sense, *marana* is the twelfth link in the chain of Dependent

Origination (*pratitya-samutpada*). (2) Death as the dying process: in this sense, particularly common in the *Abhidharma*, death occurs continuously as each moment perishes to be replaced by the next. Death in both senses is a product of the universal principle of *anicca*, impermanence.¹ In connection to a person's dying process' *marañāsanna kamma*' (death-proximate karma) or '*marañāsanna-vitthi*' (a stream of mind as continuity) follow before the death. The death-proximate (*marañāsanna kamma*) is the wholesome or unwholesome volition present immediately before death, which often may be the reflex of some previously performed good or evil action (kamma), or a sign of it (*kamma-nimitta*), or of a sign of the future existence (*gati-nimitta*) that produces rebirth.²

There are many definitions of death as given in Buddhist texts. Although there are many, some of the most significant are as follows:

The Path of Freedom tells us about death (*marana*) and explains the word death (*marana*) as follows: "The cutting off of the life faculty-this is called death."³

Moreover, *The Path of Purification* explains the word death (*marana*) as follows: "Herein, death (*marana*) is the interruption of the life faculty included within (the limits of) a single becoming (existence)."⁴

Hence, *The Great Discourse on Steadfast Mindfulness* describes as well the word death (*marana*) stating, "And what, bhikkhus, is death (*marana*)? The departing and vanishing, the destruction, the disappearance, the death, the completion of the life span, the dissolution of the aggregates (*khandha*), the discarding of the body, and the destruction of the physical life-force of beings in this or that class of beings-this, bhikkus, is called death."⁵

These require further clarification by reference to the Pali-canon.

Buddhism's Analysis Of Death And Dying As The Existence Of Continuity

In the doctrine of dependant origination, becoming and passing away is connected not only to dis-continuity, but also to continuity. All change involves a change of matter but it does not destroy matter. For instance in chemistry, solids may change into liquids and liquids into gases, but none of them are ever completely destroyed. The particular energies continue while their forms are changed. Viewed in this light, continuity is an unfailing feature of all things. Because there is continuity, one never sees an exact line of demarcation between one condition or state and the next. There is also no time gap between the two. Even time is continuous.⁶

Death, in ordinary usage, means the disappearance of the vital faculty confined to a single lifetime, in addition to that of the psychophysical life process conventionally called man, animal, personality, ego, etc. However, death according to the Pāli word '*Marāṇa*' is the continuous and repeated dissolution and vanishing of each momentary physical-mental combination, and thus it takes place every moment. Concerning this momentariness of existence, it is stated in Vis.M. VIII: "In the absolute sense, beings have only a very short moment to live, life lasting as long as a single moment that consciousness lasts. Just as a cartwheel, whether rolling or at a standstill, at all times it only rests on a single point of its periphery, even so the life of a living being lasts only for the duration of a single moment of consciousness. As soon as that moment ceases, the being also ceases. For it is said:

The being of the past moment of consciousness has lived, but does not live now, nor will it live in future. The being of the future moment has not yet lived, nor does it live now, but it will live in the future. The being of the present moment has not lived, it does live just now, but it will not live in the future.⁷

In this approach to birth and death, the duration of life in consciousness and matter should be understood as Pāli word *Citta-khaṇa*

and *Rūpa-khaṇa* according to the analysis of Buddhist Abhidhamma. It involves arising (*Uppāda*), presence (*Ṭhiti*), and dissolution (*Bhaṅga*). The duration of these is called the lesser moment. A thought unit has a duration of life called a thought movement, which has three equal phases. The duration of a physical atom is generally equivalent to seventeen thought moments (composed of fifty-one lesser moments) ($17 \times 3 = 51$). The rising and the ceasing phase of each matter also have a duration of lesser moments. The static period is, therefore, forty-nine lesser moments ($51 - 2 = 49$). Thus, Buddhism explains the birth and death situation as follows:

Death is the temporary end of a temporary phenomenon.”
 (Vsm, viii) By death is meant the extinction of psychic life (*Jīvitindriya*), heat (*Uśma-tejodhātu*), and consciousness (*viññāna*) of one individual in a particular existence. Death is not the complete annihilation of a being. Death in one place means the birth in another place, just as, in conventional terms, the rising of the sun in one place means the setting of the sun in another place.⁸

The existence of atoms of mind and matter is directly or indirectly conditioned as elements. In this connection, mind and matter are merely the functions of energies and nothing else. Mind is the thinking element, while matter is devoid of this quality. Thus, life is related to the duration and existence of a unit of mind and matter. Here, it is noteworthy that in the process of mind, there are three similar kinds of consciousness in life (*Patisandhi*, *Bhavāṅga*, and *Cuti*). The “Rebirth-process” (*upapattibhava*), in short, comprises the kamma-resultant (*Vipāka*) groups of existence. The rebirth process of life takes place in anyone of Thirty-one realms along the Samsāra chain. Then, in the case of condition of birth, life-continuity, and death Abhidhamma pointed out as follows:

“The rebirth-liking consciousness, life-continuum consciousness, and the death consciousness in one (particular) birth or life are similar and have an identical object. (sphere, nature or kind, resultant, functional - bhūmi, jāti, sampayutta, saṅkhāra).”⁹

In addition, everyone who has to be born will face death. The Buddha said, “Jati paccayā jarā-maraṇa.” Due to birth and old age, death will be the outcome. Travelers have their destinations whether they drive, fly, or take a train or boat. Wherever they are heading, there has to be a journey’s end. In the same way, beginning in our mother’s womb we make our way through life. Like everyone else, we will have to disembark at the end of life’s journey at some point or another. One existence after another, each life is only a temporary process due to different kammās.¹⁰ Hence, it is said: “Again and again the slow wits seek re-birth; Again and again comes birth and dying comes; Again and again men bear us to the grave.” This important law is easier said than understood”.¹¹ Death and dying, thus as the concept of continuity, desires a consideration that lies in textual meaning rather than an ordinary understanding of its explanation from traditional Buddhist standpoints.

Perspectives of Religious Scholars on Types of Death in the Pāli Canon

Death, according to *Abhidhamma*, as explained by Dr. Nandamālābhivamsa is as follows:

- 1) *Āyu*: the body and mind are protected by *jīvita* or life. At death, this ceases.
- 2) *Usmā*: Tejo element produced by kamma as body heat stops at death. That produced before death may still be present.
- 3) *Viññāṇa*: Any consciousness including *bhavaṅga*, which maintains the continuity of the mind stream, comes to a stop.¹²

Death can be of many types because of the causes, which could be literally understood from Pali-canon by scholars. For example, the advent of death is fourfold, namely: 1) through the expiration of the lifespan; 2) through the expiration of the (productive) karmic force; 3) through the (simultaneous) expiration of both; (timely death-kālamaraṇa) and 4) through (the intervention of) a destructive kamma (Untimely death-akālamaraṇa).¹³ Some scholars evoke classifications of death, which are followed briefly by a timely and untimely death. Nevertheless, one who finds that it does not get so far should recollect death in eight ways. It is to say:

1) as having the appearance of a murderer, 2) as the ruin of success, 3) by comparison, 4) as to sharing the body with many, 5) as to the frailty of life, 6) as sign-less, 7) as to the limitedness of the extent, and 8) as to the shortness of the moment.¹⁴

In addition, there is no way to know the moment or place of death. In the Pali-cannon this is called the sign of death. The time of death has no sign, such as one has to die only at this time, not at any other. For beings can die at any time. And where the body dies (or drops) has no sign because there is no sign that can tell us when people die, or that their bodies must drop only here, not anywhere else. For those born inside a village are dropped outside the village, and those born outside the village are dropped inside it. Likewise, those born in water are dropped on land, and those born on the land are in the water. Moreover, this can be multiplied in many ways; destiny has no sign because there is no definition, such as one who dies must be reborn here. Some die in a divine world and are reborn in the human world, and some die in the human world and are reborn in a divine world, and so on. In addition, in this way, the world goes round and round the five kinds of destinies like an ox harnessed to a machine.¹⁵

Perspectives of Religious Scholars on the Dying Process In Contemporary Myanmar

Pa-Auk Tawya holds that there are six types of mental processes (*citta-vīthi*). The first five are the eye-door, ear-door, nose-door, tongue-door, and body-door processes, whose respective objects are sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tangibles. These five types of mental process are together called the ‘five-door process’ (*pañca-dvāra-vīthi*). The sixth type of mental process has all phenomena as its object (including *Nibbāna*) and is called the ‘mind-door process’ (*mano-dvāra-vīthi*). In between these six types of process arises consciousness. In one life, one always takes the same object from the last mental process of one’s past life. It is the first type of consciousness to arise in one life, as the rebirth-linking consciousness. For the duration of that life, it arises in-between mental processes, such as the bhavaṅga consciousness. In addition, it is then the last type of consciousness to arise in one life, the death consciousness.¹⁶

Dr. Nandamālābhivaṃsa states that the last energetic mind (*maraṇāsanna javana*) arises just before death, taking as an object something seen or heard, for example, a visible object appearing in the mind-door as in a dream. The mind sinks into it, inclining to it with *taṇhā*. It becomes agitated with fear. Then *cuti* or death consciousness arises. At the same time, the kamma-born matter comes to a stop. With this, one’s existence is concluded.¹⁷ In Buddhism, typically speaking, dying is a passage to another existence. There is some action or effect that appears while we are dying. Thera Anurudha remarks that:

“Āsanna-kamma gives its effect in the next life if it is carried out near death. It is as if an aged person is seated near the door entrance of the bus (of death). He exits first, not the others seated further away. In the same way, since it happens just before Death, Āsanna-kamma is given priority.”¹⁸

“Near-death kamma (āsanna·kamma): that is an unusual kamma that at the time of death is recollected very vividly. For example, the habitually virtuous person may vividly recollect an unusual unwholesome action, and a habitually unvirtuous person may vividly recollect an unusual wholesome action.”¹⁹

These two passages, according to Nandamālābhivāṃsa, show that the effect (āsanna·kamma) is caused by an action which is done in the previous life. Hence, it is called a priory effect that gives ready outcomes for the next life. Another perspective is provided by Pa-Auk Tawya Sayadaw, who claims that an unusual death (āsanna·kamma) gives rise to an unusual ripening effect.

When looking for the causes of one’s conception, one can go back even further into the previous life. Then he will see the mentality-materiality at the time near death either in his previous life or in the object of the near-death process (*marañ-asanna·vīthi*) of past life. That is the last mental process of his past life, before the rising of the death consciousness. There are three possible objects for the near-death process. Since a person has been reborn as a human being, he will be associated with only wholesomeness:

- 1) Kamma: the volitional formations of a wholesome kamma accomplished earlier in the same or previous life. For example, one may recollect the happiness associated with offering food to bhikkhus or other receivers or the happiness and tranquillity associated with meditation.
- 2) Kamma sign (*kamma nimitta*): an object associated with a wholesome kamma accomplished earlier in the same or previous life. If one were a doctor in his past life, he might see patients; if he were a devotee of the Triple Gem, he may see a bhikkhu, a Buddha image, or hear chanting of the Pali Texts; if he were a meditator, he might see the *paṭibhāga-nimitta* of his past meditation subject.

3) Destination sign (*gati nimitta*): a vision of one's destination, where one is about to be reborn. For rebirth as a human rebirth, it was one's present mother's womb; like a red carpet.

Here, the object of the last mental process of one's past life is also the object of the first consciousness of his present life: his rebirth-linking consciousness (*paṭisandhi-citta*). The object appears because of the kammic potency that was about to mature at the end of his past life. Its result was one's rebirth-linking consciousness. In addition, the object of one's rebirth-linking consciousness is then also the object of his present *bhavaṅga* consciousness and will be the object of his death consciousness in this life.²⁰

Furthermore, according to Dr. Nandamālābhivamsa, when we near death, an object manifests itself at one of the six doors or senses through three appearances of objects which can be considered as wholesome or unwholesome or neutral. This is unlike ordinary living time as kamma objects now appear. They are as follows:

1) Kamma, from the huge amount of kammās accumulated in us, just one, which has ripened, appears. As it belongs to the past, it manifests only in the mind. Due to its kammic force – pure or impure – that cannot be controlled or avoided. It overshadows the thought process, even for someone lying unconscious. It is a recollection of whatever had been done in the past.

2) Kamma nimitta (condition of the kamma), it is the object experienced when the kamma was performed in the past. It can also belong to present kamma. For a past object, it manifests only in the mind-door. A present object can appear at any of the six doors. A Buddha statue, flowers and candles, the person we are quarreling with, the weapon used or the animal hunted: these objects, or the surroundings, such as a meditation hall, related to our kammic action are kamma nimitta.

3) Gati nimitta (sign of destination), as a present object, it appears at any of the six doors, indicating the place of rebirth. We can see with our own eyes an ugly ogre, calling and approaching us, but not the other people near us. That is why we shout, “Save me! Save me! He wants to throw me into the fire!” or we see a friend coming to fetch us to a nice mansion. Thus, we are being briefed in advance of our destination after death. This gati nimitta usually appears as a visible object.²¹

In these three passages, Dr. Nandamālābhivamsa observes that these three appearances of objects involve spiritually understanding kamma (stream of consciousness) in ordinary language. In contrast, Dr. M. T. Mon in his work *The Essence of Visuddhi Magga*, describes the three appearances of objects in the Dhamma language. Therefore, *Maranasanna-nimitta* appears at one of six doors, the *avajjana-citta* (adverting consciousness) will pick up the sense object and a stream of consciousness, known as *maranasanna-vithi*, and flow on a stream of consciousness. Hence, according to the *kamma* that is going to produce the next rebirth, an *akusala* or *kusala citta* normally functioning 5 times as *javanas* in these *vittis*. These *javanas* are known as “*maranasanna-javanas*.”²²

In addition, VsM.726 describes the process of arising & perishing, a phenomenon’s generation characteristic is seen only at its arising moment (*uppatti-kkhaṇe·yeva*) (the moment it is generated). A phenomenon’s change characteristic is seen only at its subsequent dissolution moment (*bhaṅga-kkhaṇe*) (the moment it ceases). That is how one sees the aggregates’ generation and change characteristic is one’s seeing momentary arising & perishing (*khaṇato udaya·bbaya·dassanam*) (the moment-to-moment arising and perishing of each type of mentality and materiality). Moreover, according to VsM.728, by seeing the five aggregates’ generation and change characteristics, one sees the formed characteristic (*saṅkhata-lakkhaṇa*).²³ Thus, the dying process is considered a crossing over a bridge into the next life, and also can be

objectively attempted with our lightening being as our momentary, lasting consciousness as a rebirth-mind process.

Mindfulness Of Death

According to Buddhist Dictionary , *Maraṇānussati* (Pāli, mindfulness of death): the seventh of the ten recollections (*anussati*), is a meditational exercise on death (*maraṇa*), seeing it as inevitable or imminent. The exercise is undertaken in order to stimulate effort and zeal in religious practice. The meditator reflects on the brevity and fragility of life and the numerous directions from which death can come, e.g., from snakebite, accident, illness, and assault.²⁴

Thus, we are taught that death may come anytime, anywhere, in any circumstances, and by any cause. Therefore, we should always be aware of the impermanance of life. In Vis. M. VIII it is said:

“He who wishes to develop this meditation should retreat to solitude, and while living secluded, he should thus wisely reflect: Death will come to me! The vital energy will be cut off!’ or: Death! Death!’ To him, namely, who does not wisely reflect, sorrow may arise by thinking about the death of a beloved person, just as to a mother while thinking about the death of her beloved child. Again, by reflecting on the death of a disliked person, joy may arise, just as to enemies whilst thinking on the death of their enemies. Through thinking about the death of an indifferent person, however, no emotion will arise, just as to a man whose work consists in cremating the dead at the sight of a dead body. In addition, by reflecting on one’s own death, fright may arise ... just as at the sight of a murderer with a drawn sword, one becomes filled with horror. Thus, whenever seeing here or there slain or other dead beings, one should reflect on the death of such deceased persons who once lived in happiness, and one should rouse one’s attentiveness, emotion, and knowledge and consider thus: ‘Death will come, etc.’.... Only in him who considers in

this way, will the hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*, q.v.) be repressed; and through the idea of death, attention becomes steadfast, and the exercise reaches neighborhood-concentration (*upacāra-samādhi*).”²⁵

Buddhism also encourages a reflection or meditation on death. According to Vis.M. VIII, it is said that

“one may also reflect on death in the following various ways: one may think of it as a murderer with a drawn sword standing in front of oneself that one may bear in mind that all happiness ends in death. Even the mightiest beings on this earth are subject to death, we must share this body with all those innumerable worms and other tiny beings residing therein, life is something dependent on in-and-out breathing, bound up with it life continues, and only as long as the elements, food, and breath. These are properly performing their functions; or that nobody knows when, where, and under what circumstances, death will take place, and what kind of fate we have to expect after death; or, that life is very short and limited.” (Nyanatiloka. mahathera, 1998, p.188)²⁶

In Buddhism, according to the historical *Satipatthana Sutta*, the Buddha’s original discourse on mindfulness says explicitly that: “One must begin by focusing the attention on the breathing and then go on to note all other physical and mental phenomena that arise.”²⁷ In addition, Ajahn Chah states that

“The emotion of happiness is a form of birth. The tendency to become sad is a form of death. When there is death, there is birth, and what is born has to die. That which arises and passes away is caught in this unremitting cycle of becoming... If [the Buddha] experienced something positive, he did not become positive along with it. He simply observed and remained aware. If he experienced something

negative, he did not become negative. In addition, why was that? Because his mind had been cut free from such causes and conditions. He had penetrated the Truth. The conditions leading to rebirth no longer existed. This is the knowing that is certain and reliable. This mind is truly at peace. This is what is not born, does not age, does not get sick, and does not die. This is neither cause nor effect, nor dependent on cause and effect. It is independent of the process of causal conditioning. The causes then cease with no conditioning remaining. This mind is beyond birth and death, beyond happiness and sorrow, beyond both good and evil.”²⁸

Deathlessness and Nibbana

According to Theravada Buddhism, *Amata*, ‘Deathlessness’ according to popular belief is a name for *Nibbàna* (s. *Nibbàna*), the final liberation from the wheel of rebirths, and therefore also from the ever-repeated deaths.²⁹ Nevertheless, in *Abhidhanppadipika* 6, 7, 8, and 9 it is not misunderstood that a word called *Amata* is similar to 46 synonyms meaning *Nibbàna* (Thera Mahamoggalla, 2013, pp.2-3).³⁰ Hence, *Nibbana* is described precisely as “profound, hard to see and hard to understand, unattainable by mere reasoning” (MN 26.19). The well-known passage from the *Udana* declares concerning *Nibbana*:

““There is an “unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned,” the existence of which makes possible “escape from the born, become, made, and conditioned” (Ud 8:3/80). The Majjhima Nikaya characterises *Nibbana* in similar ways. It is “the unborn, un-ageing, un-ailing, deathless, sorrowless, undefiled supreme security from bondage,” which the Buddha attained to on the night of his enlightenment.”³¹

In addition, *Nibbàna*, according to the commentaries, is ‘freedom from desire’ *Nibbàna* constitutes the highest and ultimate goal of all Buddhist aspirations, i.e., absolute extinction of greed, hate, delusion, and convulsively clinging to existence It is also ultimate and absolute

deliverance from all future rebirth, old age, disease and death, from all suffering and misery. This takes place at the Death of the Arahāt.

Crucial for Nibbāna, but also for a theoretical understanding of it, is to grasp the truth of anattā (q.v.), the egoless-ness and insubstantiality of all forms of existence fully. Without such an understanding, one will necessarily misconceive Nibbāna – according to one’s either materialistic or metaphysical leanings – as the annihilation of an ego, or as an eternal state of existence into which either an ego or self enters or with which it merges. Hence it is said: “Mere suffering exists, no sufferer is found; The deed is, but no doer of the deed is there; Nibbāna is, but not the man that enters it; The path is, but no traveler on it is seen.” (Vis.M. XVI) .³²

In other words, death is not merely a person’s future state but an ongoing process throughout life. Deathlessness is not a future state to be attained but is the property of a mind for which every present moment is a moment of selfless, essenceless awareness.³³ Hence, as the *Dhammapada* said, “Fully knowing the arising and passing of the khandhas one attains joy and delight. For those who know, this is the deathless.”³⁴ Therefore, some scholars explain that mindfulness is the path to the deathless. ‘This’ is the deathless. You are recognizing dhamma, in other words, amatadhamma (deathlessness).³⁵

Conclusion

In Buddhism, death is understood in relation to a person’s physical and mental systems, which involve the five aggregates which combines with the four elements in every living human being. These systems are constantly in the process of ceasing and recreating, yet we often do not notice this rising or falling, the becoming and passing away of these combinations of the five Aggregates throughout the course of our life. Nevertheless, mindfulness and meditation dying process can lead one more to understand the truth of impermanence, suffering, sensations, perceptions, and to be consciousness of dissolution and vanishing of each momentary physical-mental combination, and thus it takes place every moment until the end of our lives.

In Theravada Buddhism, understanding death and dying is to understand the three characteristics of existence (s. *ti-lakkhana*): Impermanence, Suffering, and No-self that allows human beings to see things differently than we see with ordinary eyes. Perhaps, with this different kind of seeing, one can generate a different effect in the cycle of samsara. It allows for a movement beyond our selfishness, attachments, and delusions.

ENDNOTES

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