



FEAR OF DEATH



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The fear of death is widespread. Most of us know someone who fears death, or maybe you fear death. People who fear death often think of dying rather than making the most out of life. Fear of leaving loved ones poverty-stricken, fear of ill health, insanity and religious fanaticism also accompany this fear. Humans, animals as well as all born into this world fear death because they love to live and not to die. This is the natural phenomenon from which none can escape. Death, in whatever form, is painful because separation from kith and kin is sorrowful. From a physio-medical point of view, death is the cessation of all cellular activity in the body by the loss of breath.

All religions believe death is certain and life is uncertain, no matter where, how or when it occurs. Death should be serene and peaceful. If not, there arises fear and pain due to uncertainty of life after death. Then there is also attachment to those loved ones, fanned by fidelity and affection, mostly between close relatives. A person on the verge of death, if he is of sound mind, recollects incidents of the past, and his next life is believed to depend on the merits and demerits of such thought.

Generally, people do not contemplate on death while they are alive, but it is good to do so now and then. When a person visits a funeral house, the sight of the dead body gives him food for thought that it would happen to him also some day, to depart from this world leaving everything and taking nothing, except the results of his good and bad actions. Contemplating on death can release us from the grip of the sensual lure attached

to worldliness. We will not be deluded by material wealth, i.e., movable and immovable properties, but will channel our resources towards a more fulfilling and rewarding life to achieve the aspired goal of liberation from all suffering.

How People Handle Fear of Death

In general, older people think about death more often than do younger people, but healthy, normally aging older adults usually express less fear and anxiety about death than do younger adults. In a more recent survey conducted among 2,000 Americans age 45 and older were questioned about their fear of dying. More young people (about 30 percent of those 45-49) expressed fear of dying than older people (about 15 percent of those 75 and older). More women overall (24 percent) than men overall (18 percent) were afraid of dying. The role of religious conviction and belief in an afterlife is ambiguous in reducing the fear of death for older people. In some cases, a strong conviction does seem to help. But in other cases it may actually increase the intensity of fear. In general, older people who face old age with the feeling of integrity in their lives (their lives were worth living) have less fear than do older people who are confronted by despair that their lives were not worth living.

Is there any consistent pattern to how people face death when they know they have a terminal illness and will die fairly soon?



This question is of particular interest in gerontology because a large proportion of the terminally ill population consists of older people. In the early 1960s Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross provided evidence to suggest that many terminally ill people progress through a series of emotional stages. Her stage theory was based on interviews with 200 terminally ill individuals.

According to Kubler-Ross, the first stage is one of shock and disbelief in which the individual feels a diagnostic mistake must have been made and denies the reality of the diagnosis. However, most terminally ill individuals eventually accept the diagnosis and move into the second stage, one characterized by the expression of anger and hostility directed toward healthy people. This stage is followed by a bargaining stage in which they may appeal to a higher being, pledging that they will be better persons if they are allowed to live. Eventually they realize the bargaining is ineffective, and they enter a stage in which they experience depression, guilt and shame about their lives. Discussing their life experiences with others helps them enter the final stage in which they accept the inevitability of their own deaths. Yet, Kubler-Ross said not all terminally ill people progress through these stages. And even those who do may move through them at different rates.

Preparing for Death

This "sense of danger" inspires us to make preparations so that we are no longer in the danger we are in now, for example by practicing moral discipline, purifying our negative karma, and accumulating as much merit, or good karma, as possible. We put on a seat belt out of a sense of danger of the unseen dangers of traffic on the road, and that seat belt protects us from going through the windscreen. We can do nothing about other traffic, but we can do something about whether or not we go through the windscreen if someone crashes into us. Similarly, we can do nothing about the fact of death,

but we can seize control over how we prepare for death and how we die. Eventually, through Tantric spiritual practice, we can even attain a deathless body.

Dying with regrets is not at all unusual. To avoid a sad and meaningless end to our life we need to remember continually that we too must die. Contemplating our own death will inspire us to use our life wisely by developing the inner refuge of spiritual realizations; otherwise we shall have no ability to protect ourselves from the sufferings of death and what lies beyond. Moreover, when someone close to us is dying, such as a parent or friend, we shall be powerless to help them because we shall not know how; and we shall experience sadness and frustration at our inability to be of genuine help. Preparing for death is one of the kindest and wisest things we can do both for ourselves and others.

We are Travellers

The fact of the matter is that this world is not our home. We are travellers, passing through. We came from our previous life, and in a few years, or a few days, we shall move on to our next life. We entered this world empty-handed and alone, and we shall leave empty-handed and alone. Everything we have accumulated in this life, including our very body, will be left behind. All that we can take with us from one life to the next are the imprints of the positive and negative actions we have created. If we ignore death we shall waste our life working for things that we shall only have to leave behind, creating many negative actions in the process, and having to travel on to our next life with nothing but a heavy burden of negative karma.

Cultivating Positive Minds

On the other hand, if we base our life on a realistic awareness of our mortality, we shall regard our spiritual



development as far more important than the attainments of this world, and we shall view our time in this world principally as an opportunity to cultivate positive minds such as patience, love, compassion, and wisdom. Motivated by these virtuous minds we shall perform many positive actions, thereby creating the cause for future happiness. When the time of our death comes we shall be able to pass away without fear or regret, our mind empowered by the virtuous karma we have created.

Using Our Life Meaningfully

The Kadampa Teachers say that there is no use in being afraid when we are on our deathbed and about to die; the time to fear death is while we are young. Most people do the reverse: While they are young they think, "I shall not die", and they live recklessly without concern for death; but when death comes they are terrified. If we develop fear of death right now we shall use our life meaningfully by engaging in virtuous actions and avoiding non-virtuous actions, thus creating the cause to take a fortunate rebirth. When death actually comes we shall feel like a child returning to the home of its parents, and pass away joyfully, without fear. We shall become like Longdöl Lama, a Tibetan Buddhist Master who lived to a great old age. When the time of his death came he was overjoyed. People asked him why he was so happy and he replied, 'If I die this

morning I shall be born again this evening in a Pure Land. My future life will be far superior to this one.' Longdöl Lama had prepared carefully for his death and chosen the specific place of his rebirth. If we use our life to engage purely in spiritual practice we can do the same.

Take Control of Your Fears

Nature has given us control over one thing—our thoughts. A thought is the beginning of every journey—everything ever created was first a thought. Fears are nothing more than thoughts, a state of mind. You control your thoughts, so you are in full control of your worries as well.

Accept death as a natural course of life. Make a decision to make the most out of the money you have and continue to work hard to earn more. Learn to accept life without love if the situation occurs. Do things for yourself, not for other people. Acknowledge and embrace old age for the wisdom it brings. Enjoy your health and have faith that your health is how it is meant to be.

Kill the habit of worry and let faith bring you the happiness, peace of mind, poise and calmness that it grants freely.
