

# Meaning of Life and Experience of Death in Buddhism

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Today, I am going to speak about the meaning of life and the experience of death in a positive way, which is very important to our lives. As you see, everybody, no matter what country he or she comes from, what language he or she speaks, what social, economic and political system he or she belongs to, what kind of culture or belief system he or she is acquainted with, whether he or she is rich or poor, educated or uneducated, desire to have peace and happiness and be free from suffering. There is no question about that. Even if we have to destroy our happiness, we are destroying our happiness in order to bring happiness. Even if we have to chase the suffering, we are chasing the suffering in order to be free from suffering. Due to ignorance, we chase the suffering unintentionally in order to be free from suffering. We make efforts and work very hard in our lives in different fields to acquire more happiness and be free from suffering. Due to different cultures, different belief systems, different teachings, we follow different paths materialistically, spiritually, outwardly and inwardly. However, the basic purpose of our lives is the same, that is, to bring happiness and be free from suffering. This is the meaning of life and the purpose of life.

Because of that, as modern technology advances, many new things are invented and developed in order to bring happiness and to make our lives more comfortable and peaceful. The advanced technology enables us to measure and go to the outer space. We try to explore the outer space as much as we can even though there is no limit to the outer space. We try to see what we can find there – another planet, another place, what kind of things or beings exist. We would like to have more control of the outer space in order to secure our peace and happiness. Computers can do so much and still there is no end to exploring technology in order to have better and more meaningful lives. When we are so busy exploring the outer technology, outer phenomena, we forget our inner mental technology. The quality of our inner mental technology is immeasurable, infinite, like space. We keep projecting and exploring outside and forget that mind is the one that explored and created all these technologies. We lose the sense of mental quality. To know our mind, we do not have to go anywhere. It resides within us, face to face and yet we do not know. We judge other things, other people, outer technologies, we do not know how to judge our mind.

Let me say a few words about Buddha's life story as a historical person who taught us Buddhism for more than 2500 years ago. Buddha was born as a prince who was called Siddhartha. His father was a very powerful king in Northern India who ruled a big country. Siddhartha lived in the kingdom until he was 29. His father supported him and made sure that he had a perfect life. He had everything he needed – a very beautiful kingdom, a comfortable place with relatives, servants and all the services. One day, he saw a person who was old and could not see well nor walk well with shaking hands. Another day, he saw a man who was sick, full of pain in his body. His pain completely occupied his whole being, physically and mentally. Another day, he saw another man who was dead and was carried to the street. His family and friends were crying, beating their chests, asking him not to leave. When Siddhartha saw these, he woke up. He asked numerous questions – "What is happening? Who are these people? What are they doing? What are they experiencing and why? I have never seen all these before, what is all this about?" He gathered many scholars and ministers and asked them these questions. Their reply was that every person individually has to go through these experiences. Everybody whether he or she is educated or uneducated, rich or poor, who has been born into this world has to go through these experiences by himself or herself. We cannot deny these experiences.

Siddhartha was deeply moved by what he saw so he thought that it was not enough just being in the beautiful palace, just enjoying a comfortable life. There were many people relying on him. So what kind of help could he offer them? What kind of ability he had to help them? Not only that, if he himself had to go through these experiences, did he have the wisdom and ability to face these challenges positively? Many serious questions arose in his mind and he could not answer them at that moment. "It is not enough to just to attach to this beautiful palace with all these beautiful people. I must look for some special answer." For that reason, he denounced the kingdom. He denounced the kingdom not out of weakness, not out of selfishness, rather out of great compassion, great wisdom. Out of great compassion because he would like to help everybody to go through these challenging situations and circumstances. Out of great wisdom because it required such a technique and method of how to face these challenges. So for six years, he went through great hardship, even without eating food, without wearing clothes, but he could not find complete answers. So he thought, being in the kingdom which had every comfort, wealth and luxury, there was no answer to be free from suffering; by going through lots of hardship, not eating food, not wearing clothes, there was no answer to be free from suffering and to have happiness. So what was the real solution? He investigated, scrutinized and realized that it was the mind. Mind is the most mysterious subject. It lies within us and yet we do not know how it looks like, the way it abides. We cannot judge or have control over what we do. In the morning, we may be happy and peaceful; in the afternoon, we may be completely different with different mental states. So knowing our mind is most crucial. When our mind is not realized, when we do not know our own mind, even if we own the whole world, the whole universe, there is no happiness, there is no peace. It does not mean that we should not have food or clothes. It does not mean that we should not have anything. We can have anything but yet if we do not know the mind, that cannot bring complete happiness and ultimate peace. So for that reason, he sat under the Bodhi tree and he dedicated himself and promised himself, "Until I realize the total nature of the mind, I will not wake up or stand from this seat even if my body disintegrates, falls into many pieces!" With such strong determination and powerful mind, he sat practicing and meditating and realized the total nature of the mind and at that time, he was called Buddha, the fully awakened one.

When we are asleep, we are like dead, we do not know what is happening around us and we have no awareness. Likewise, when we are in the state of ignorance, we do not know what we are doing. We think that we are doing many things in a smart way; but in reality, we are not. We want to have happiness but we destroy our happiness. We want to be free from suffering but we chase more suffering. It is due to our ignorance that lies within us. However, our precious human life has every ability and opportunity to be fully awakened from that ignorant state and put all the sufferings to an end. All the causes of suffering can be purified. With great wisdom and compassion, this precious human life can give us all the qualities. With the help of precious Dharma teachings, we can utilize our energies, efforts, time and opportunities in the best way to realize the truth. Therefore when Buddha attained complete enlightenment, Buddhahood, he taught the Four Noble Truths. He said, "This is suffering, we should all know." In a way, suffering is something that we do not desire but on the other hand, suffering is very important. Without suffering, we would not wake up. Suffering gives us hints. It gives us great opportunity to look at suffering and examine what the causes of suffering are and avoid the causes of suffering totally. That is why Buddha said that we should know the suffering, be aware of suffering. Once we know the suffering, there is no more to know. However, if we do not know what suffering really is, even though we would like to be free from suffering, we end up chasing more suffering. Knowing about suffering, the causes of suffering and how to avoid the causes of suffering is called great wisdom. With this understanding, we practise wholeheartedly and patiently. In this way, we know how to be sincere to ourselves. Otherwise, we destroy ourselves by ourselves. But first we have to face suffering and accept it. If we do not accept suffering, then

small suffering will become big suffering. Suffering on the one hand is very negative, undesirable and nobody should have that. However, to attain Buddhahood, complete enlightenment, suffering is very useful and very helpful. I am sure there are many practitioners when they encounter suffering, they can focus better in their meditation and when everything goes well, they forget about meditation. Every sentient being desire to have happiness and be free from suffering. When we cultivate and develop the thought of genuinely wishing every sentient being to be happy and free from suffering, it is called the mind of great compassion, Bodhicitta. Great compassion is the real source of peace, fearlessness and courage. Great compassion helps us to open up our potential and be closer to the nature of our mind. I am sure you have heard of many great Bodhisattvas who have great indomitable courage to help and benefit other sentient beings. That indomitable courage comes from great compassion. The nature of the mind is infinite, like space, beyond limit. When we do not realize this, we become so narrow and limited. Our mind is deluded and confused with self-centered ego, attachment, hatred, anger and emotions, which invite more suffering. It is like a veil which covers the true nature of our mind. Our mind has no ego, no attachment and no hatred. Ego, attachment, hatred and so on are just bad habits. Ego is something that we created and we cherish it and take care of something that does not exist and that is why we suffer. If it is something that exists, we should not suffer. When there is peace and harmony, we feel so comfortable. The moment when there is anger, hatred or violence, we feel so uncomfortable. This shows that the nature of our mind does not agree with that. The true nature of our mind does not have these delusion or confusion. Thus, in order to reveal the total nature of the mind, we have to avoid all these confusion and delusion. Therefore we need to purify these bad habits, not the mind. With the guidance from a good teacher, doing meditation practice is a way to purify these bad habits. We need to make efforts to relax, to get to know the unfabricated nature of the mind. When we realize the nature of the mind, we have total freedom. Therefore, great wisdom and compassion are the most important technologies within us that we can utilize in order to completely free ourselves from suffering. This is a brief talk on how to achieve a meaningful life.

Experience of birth, aging, sickness and death is for everybody, not just to some. We cannot deny it. Denying does not help us to free from suffering. We have to explore and understand what we can do and how to face it positively. For example, when a doctor examine patients who have a problem, the doctor has to know what symptoms they have and the causes of their sickness. After the doctor knows the problem well, he can then prescribe good medicine. If the doctor does not know the patient, he cannot prescribe medicine. Similarly, we want to know how to free from suffering of death, we have to know about death. Death is a good opportunity to free ourselves from suffering and to attain enlightenment. So death is unavoidable. There is a story about two great masters who discussed teachings, experiences and all that and one asked the other master, " Since you are a great practitioner, great teacher, maybe you have a special method of not experiencing death, please show me that method." The master said, "You should not be born. You should not be here at all. Do not create karma. Once you are born, definitely, you will die one day. This is unavoidable." Generally speaking, birth and death are like everyday experience; in the morning when we wake, it is like birth; when we go to sleep, it is like death. When we go to sleep, we have no awareness. We do not know what we are doing. The next day when we wake up in the morning, we remember we had such and such dreams, that's all. So it is good to make preparation for death. It means that we sacrifice our happiness in the morning for the happiness in the afternoon. We sacrifice our happiness and peace today for the happiness and peace tomorrow. We sacrifice our happiness and peace this year for the happiness and peace next year. So why not sacrifice our happiness and peace this life for the happiness and peace at the time of death. Especially, when we are alive, we can get a lot of help from others, from our family, teachers, friends, relatives. At the time of death, we cannot get any support.

We alone have to face it. No matter how dear friends, relatives we have, they cannot do anything. Therefore, it is very important to utilize our precious human life and prepare ourselves to die without fear, to die happily. This becomes the real purpose of life. It is very important because no matter how much happiness and peace we experience in this life, at the time of death, it is like a dream, an illusion. When you have good times during the day, it is just a memory, no substance to it. There is nothing we can attach to. The same thing applies to at the time of death, if we could prepare well, organize our mind, develop great wisdom and compassion so that we die without fear. Otherwise, no matter how much wonderful time we have during this life, at the time of death, it becomes a dream, an illusion. Therefore, we need to remind ourselves about our death, not to make life miserable but rather to awake our wisdom and compassion, to be a good human being, to be totally sincere to ourselves. Just as we now need happiness and peace, at the time of death, definitely, we need happiness and peace. However, it will not happen by itself at that moment. Just like pushing a computer button seems very easy but preparing that button takes years of hard and dedicated work. Therefore, we need to prepare now. We prepare ourselves by developing wisdom, compassion and all other mental qualities. So at the time of death, it is just like pushing the button. That button we have to prepare now for dying is like going to sleep. The mind draws things out. We project outside. Mind sinks more and more inside, we cannot hear, see or think well. Our body is made up of four elements. All our functions, senses are based on the four elements – water, air, fire and earth. When they function well, we are healthy. When they do not function well, our health deteriorates. When they do not function at all, we are dying. During that time, it depends on individuals how familiar they are with different types of meditation techniques, realizing awareness and so on. When we know those well, it is like going to a familiar place. When we do not prepare well, we are like going to an unknown place and have no idea of where we are going. There are lots of fear, doubt and hesitation. When we prepare well, it is like having visited the place before and we have some idea of where we are going. When we do not prepare well, we have no idea and we are lost. Death is inevitable and we all have to go through death. Therefore, in order to die positively without fear, it becomes very important to prepare now. Based on wisdom and compassion, we use meditation techniques to stabilize and organize our mind. Mind brings insights and we should get to know it, be familiar with it and make friend with it rather than making enemy with it. During this process, we should transform our negative thoughts. For example, if we put manure into a field, it becomes so fertilized that big crops can grow on the field. Similarly, within our negative thoughts, if we plant the seeds of Bodhicitta, big tree of Bodhicitta can grow within them. Since every individual is endowed with the seed of enlightenment, we have the ability and responsibility to awake that potential, to prepare the button, to push the button, to open the door of enlightenment and to see our Buddha mind directly. Until we are fully awoken from our ignorance, we have to make effort and practise patiently.