

Question: Venerable Sir, What is death? What are the teachings of the Supreme Buddha regarding death?

Answer: "When there is departing of beings from their sects, breaking up, vanishing, breaking up of five aggregates, leaving behind a dead body, expiring of life, that is meant as Death".

Supreme Buddha incorporated death as a component to be comprehended under the *Dukkha Sathya* (The Truth of Suffering).

Question: However, there are numerous notions with regard to death in the society today. Some consider death as a trivial matter. Some claim that they are ready to die at any moment. What are your thoughts on this?

Answer: Yes, there are various notions regarding death. Those who believe in these notions will definitely get in to deep trouble. Some believe that death is not a matter to be alarmed. There are some faiths, which express similar views. Supreme Buddha preached circumstances under which beings should not fear death.

"I see a lot of misconceptions becoming popular in the present society. For instance, some faiths teach that it is up to the Creator God to punish or reward beings, whether they have committed sins or accumulated merits. This means that the beings are at the mercy of the God, who could revoke the sins of beings and summon them to him if they praise, thank and serve the God. Merits do not play a role as everything happens according to the wish of the God. This the degree of devotion promoted by these faiths. Some take to killing in the name of these faiths. Misconceptions on the notion death also have a negative impact in this regard. They are not supposed to fear taking lives. Misconceptions rule the act of

killing of beings. They are under the impression that killing a being in the name of the Creator of God is not wrong. Ignorance with regard to death exists to a great extent in the present society. Worldly beings do not understand that "death" is a component to be comprehended under the Truth of Suffering.

Question: Similarly, there are erroneous political ideologies dealing with death. Is a materialistic analysis of death similar to this?

Answer: Definitely. They claim that the process of bodily consciousness is materialistic. Then, this will be a matter to be con-

sidered under Dialectical Materialism. This elaborates that consciousness results from the interaction of matter. This type of consciousness would abolish itself with the disappearance of matter. They reject the idea of an afterlife. This would mean that beings should endeavor to achieve all expectations within their short life span only. There were similar concepts and teachings by various masters during the time of the Buddha. They proclaimed that death was not a matter to be feared in the least. They further asserted that no one would acquire any merits or demerits by engaging in religious rites, including human sacrifices along the whole length, upstream and downstream of the Ganges River. They expressed the view that the life would come to an end at the grave yard, and therefore, beings should lead a happy life only when they live, even if they get in to financial debts. This was also the teaching of Ajitha Kesakambali (One who wore a blanket of hair). His materialistic philosophy was known as the Doctrine of Annihilation after Death.

In the meantime, Makkhali Gosala presented another view. He asserted that there was no fruit pursuant to any good or bad deed. It is meaningless for a being to make any attempt to make spiritual development. Any person would be reborn 84,000 times undeniably. On completion of this period, a being would reach deliverance. He quoted a simile of a ball of thread which is tossed from a hill would roll down the hill until the thread reaches its end. Similarly, a being is supposed to complete the required number of cycles of death and rebirth.

Most of the followers embraced his views rapidly at that time. The Supreme Buddha elucidated, "Empty man, Makkhali Gosala's views are analogues to a bag-net (*kemana*) used for catching fish. He is a human bag-net" (trap)

Materialistic teaching is similar to this. It is also a human bag-net. It is not concerned about death. It is indifferent towards death of any being, at anytime, anywhere. Similar beliefs are widespread in the world today. Certain religious visions support these beliefs.

Question: What is the definition of death in subjectivism? (Personality

view)

Answer: A self is something (that cannot be detected with an instrument) which exists in the body. This self has originated from the god's self. Therefore, a being has got a divine self. A physical body has surrounded the self. Even though the physical body grows old, the self does not. Self persists like permanent matter. Therefore, the self makes its way towards the god after death. This version is found in Hinduism most of the time. For instance, in Bhagavath Geetha, what does the God Krishna say when Arjuna refuses to kill relatives? "It does not matter. It is their physical lives that die. Their selves come to me. Then their selves will transform to eternal bliss"

Due to these types of widespread beliefs, the true nature of the concept of death does not come to light.

Question: Is the concept of "heaven" similar to this?

Answer: Yes, the concept of heaven is connected with Subjectivism. (Personality view)

Question: Isn't the word "heaven" is used in Buddhism?

Answer: Yes. However, it is used in a different context. It symbolizes heavenly planes. Gods would live for periods of eons, and depart from heavenly abodes when they run out of their merits. Then, they will be reborn in terms of their karmic power. A concept of a permanent soul is not found in this instance.

There was another materialistic view in Supreme Buddha's time. Accordingly, Ajitha Kesakambali believed that hacking a person to death with a weapon means mere penetration of four Primary Elements through four Primary Elements (*Satara Maha Dhatu*). So there is no reason for lamenting. This shows us the way those masters abetted man slaughter in that era. Similar ideologies had led to the annihilation of human lives during religious conflicts in the past. That is why the ignorance of death is so serious.

Question: How do we perceive death in terms of Buddhism?

Answer: "A precept has been laid down for monks not to praise death. Never tell even a sick person that death is more comfortable than suffering with a sickness. Dhamma states clearly, if a sick person dies as a result of refusing medicine, on the advice of a noble monk, that death is praiseworthy, then, this noble monk com-

mits a sin".

Therefore, a person on the death bed may not be consoled by religious rites such as chanting of *Pariththa* (Pirith), tying "Pirith Threads". If a dying person is encouraged and comes to a conclusion that all of these rituals mean signs of farewell to his death and dies with that mentality, then, the monk, who attends to this person's final rites, commits a sin.

Question: Then, what is the procedure to be followed in respect of a dying person?

Answer: On this occasion, a monk should not praise the death. Instead, a monk should praise the importance of living. A monk should encourage, "Meritorious person, continue to live mindfully. Even a momentary life spent with mindfulness is of great value. Wish for a heavenly birth".

One should understand that wishing for a heavenly birth and wishing for death are two separate aspects.

Question: Is there a methodology to conclude whether a death is virtuous?

Answer: Once, a group of monks approached Sariputta Maha Thero and inquired, "Venerable Sir, how could the death of a person be honorable?" Venerable Sariputta Thero replied, "If a departed person possessed the qualities such as virtue, wise attention, loving-kindness and also practiced Tranquility and Insight meditation, then this person's death would be a virtuous, honorable one".

Question: Does this mean that Buddhism always analyzes death in relation to rebirth?

Answer: Yes, of course. "With Becoming (*Bhava*) as the condition, birth (*Jati*) arises. Bhava means formation of Karma results. One is reborn depending on one's Karma results. With the attainment of Arahantship (Fruition of Holiness), such a Noble One will gain the "knowledge of death and rebirth of beings" according to their karma. One dies subject to the laws of karma".

Question: Some believe that death is not an issue as long as one is able to fulfill one's social obligations entirely during this lifetime.

Answer: This is ignorance (*Avijja*). It is an illusion to think that it is proper to die after fulfilling one's social obligations such as providing shelter, food and education to children. These beings are shrouded with ignorance of death. They wish for pleasant rebirths mistakenly. However, we cannot accurately judge the outcomes of these situations. In *Maha-dukkhakkhandha Sutta* (The Great Mass of Stress), we find instances, where beings, who lead virtuous lives, are compelled to be reborn in lower worlds. We need to take a closer look at these instances and should refrain from forming wrongful views with regard to accumulation of merits.

"The foremost qualification to confront death without any fear is one's conduct in conformity with the Dhamma. One who lives with the Dhamma is protected by the Dhamma. (*Dhammo Have Rakkati Dhamma Chari*). This is analogous to holding an umbrella in the rain. This is the outcome of practicing the dhamma. One who practices dhamma will be free from biases. This is the teaching of the Supreme Buddha".

This shows how the dhamma prepares us to encounter death without any fear. Sariputta Maha Thero described how death positioned itself in front and behind a being. Therefore, it is advisable and beneficial for every person to have a clear picture of the reality of death.

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Death and afterlife

