

# *Making Friends with Death*

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*A Buddhist Guide to  
Encountering Mortality*

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*To my husband, Chuck,  
and to my daughters,  
Jessica and Deborah*

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## *Doorways*

OUR LIFE as a whole is a transition. It is not one solid thing. Currently we are in the transition from birth to death. According to Buddhist tradition, after we die, we are also in transition—the transition from death to birth. Over the course of many lifetimes, we cycle from birth to death, from death to birth, from birth to death, and so on. Transitions also take place in smaller cycles throughout our life. In fact, each moment of experience is a transition, bounded by its own birth and death. Within the overall context of our life and the great transition we all face at the time of our physical death, we encounter many smaller transitions on a daily basis. Our life is filled with transitions. It is a continual series of births and deaths.

Transitions are like doorways. When we open a door, we think we know what we will find on the other side, but we can never be sure. We do not know with certainty whether we will find a friend or an enemy, an obstacle or an opportunity. Without actually opening the door and walking through, we have no way of knowing. When we face such a door, we feel uncertain, vulnerable, exposed. Our usual strategies do not hold. We are in no-man's-land. Transitions make us uncomfortable, and they are often accompanied by some degree of pain, but at the same time, they open us to new possibilities.

It does not matter whether the transitions we face are

minute or major dramatic occasions. In either case, they have the power to transform our lives. When one experience has died and the next has not yet arisen, we are not caught, but free. Such moments are precious. During these moments of heightened vulnerability, it is possible for us to see things freshly. This can be liberating, but it can also be terrifying.

Transitions shake up old patterns and provoke us to explore new directions. This was the case for a woman I know who lost everything when she suffered a major stroke. Before her stroke, she had a successful career in business and a loving husband; she was at the peak of her powers. But after the stroke, she suddenly had nothing. Her husband left her, and she lacked the strength to resume her career. She had to start all over, at the most basic level. But there was no way she could put her old life back together again.

At that point, instead of trying to reconstruct her old patterns, she cleared the decks. She stepped back and looked at her life from a completely new perspective. Had it not been for her stroke, she would not have taken such a leap. The stroke opened doors that had been closed for a long time. It awakened her appreciation for life as well as her openness and adventurous nature, which had become dormant. Since she was no longer taking her way of life for granted, she was more vibrant and alive. She was in that rare place where there is nothing to lose and nothing to prove.

Transitions are not easy. For instance, I met a man who had been robust all his life and then unexpectedly began experiencing a series of health problems. It turned out that he had contracted the AIDS virus from a girlfriend who was unaware that she carried it. The man was so distraught at this news that he decided to commit suicide. He tried hanging himself, but the rope broke. So he got a stronger rope, but the window frame where he tied it did not hold. When he made his third attempt, someone discovered him and cut him down just as he was losing

consciousness. But at that point, something clicked. He was filled with a dramatically heightened appreciation for his life just as it was, with all its difficulties, and he was determined to find a way to work with it.

Although we are always in transition, it is easier to recognize major transitions in our lives than the more subtle transitions moment to moment. There are so many: our first day at kindergarten, graduating from high school or college, getting married, getting divorced, getting our first job, losing our first job, becoming a parent, and many more. Such transitions stir things up—exhilaration and fear, sadness and doubt, the comfort of the familiar and the possibility of new directions. We can see the way things open up and then close down again over and over as we go through life, and how we take on new identities as we enter each new stage of life. Transitions have a lot to teach us; they are very revealing.

When we hit transitions, there is a unique quality of freshness. It is like traveling to a strange country where we are not familiar with the language, terrain, or customs. At first, everything is vivid and new, almost overwhelmingly so. But eventually, as we adjust, that freshness dissolves, and we no longer see so clearly. We have a new set of blinders, the blinders of familiarity. Once things get familiar, we can again coast on autopilot; we are no longer as awake.

When a relationship is new, it also has this quality of freshness. We take a great interest in every aspect of our lover's life and pay attention to what she thinks, her style of talking, her fears, her hopes, the way she brushes her teeth, everything. But over time, we grow so familiar with that person that we no longer need to pay attention; we already know what we will see. And eventually, all we see is what fits our preconceptions. Since we are not interested in looking further than that, nothing new can enter our view of her. In effect, we have made a mummy out of a living person, and we may not take another fresh look at our

lover until we enter our next big transition, such as when that relationship ends. At that point, we may once again really see that person, but in an entirely new light.

~~Our basic strategy is to avoid the pain of transition.~~ We prefer to define our world, to pin it down so that we can live comfortably within our own definition of things. Even the briefest encounter with uncertainty throws us, and we soon begin to panic. For instance, we may have an appointment to meet somebody at his house. But when we find his house and ring the doorbell, there is no response. At that point, we begin to get nervous. Our mind starts to race: "Did I make a mistake? Is this the right house? The right time? The right day? Did he stand me up? Did he forget?" In the brief time before that door opens, we spin out a million theories. We do so because we are intent on securing our ground. We are uncomfortable with the transition in which we find ourselves.

Securing our ground is so important to us that we may even prefer *bad* news to the uncertainty of not knowing. We are much happier once we can affix a label, *any* label. For instance, when I was in India, I became very sick with a tropical fever. In my semidelirious state, I kept replaying scenes in my mind from an old TV movie, in which colonials were dropping like flies from mysterious undiagnosed fevers while the natives beat their drums ominously in the surrounding forests. I remember the distinct relief I felt when my malady was finally given a label, "typhoid fever," although you could hardly call such a diagnosis good news. In part, having a label for the disease meant that there might also be a remedy. But beyond that, my relief came from the simple fact of there being a *name*, some handle to make what I was feeling less raw and threatening.

We like to "get a handle on things," and we are much less comfortable with experience that we have not yet processed or that we cannot label. But we encounter such experiences all the time, in the transitions from one experience to the next and in

the many gaps and discontinuities of life. Such transitions are not just occasional blips; they take place continuously.

How do we relate to these moment-to-moment transitions, ~~the many small births and deaths we experience in everyday life?~~ Do we notice them, or are we simply oblivious to them? Even momentary transitions have a lot to teach us, but first, we need to slow down enough to connect with them. There is no possibility of learning from them if we are caught up in the never-ending project of covering them up. And if we are unable to deal with the transitions going on now, how can we possibly deal with the more extreme transition of our own physical death?

Although big transitions are hard to miss, most of the little transitions in life pass us right by. We jump from one experience to the next, like frogs hopping across lily pads, and never notice how we get from here to there. In that way, we create an illusion of continuity, a pretense of solid ground. For us, there is no pond—only one solid green lily-pad world. However, that is not our only option. It is possible to learn how to be more in tune with the process of life and the fluidity of experience rather than continuing to leap from one secure ground to the next. Working with transitions is a way of opening ourselves to the dimension of change, to experience not yet captured.

To work with transitions and learn from them, we could start by noticing how pervasive they are and how we tend to blank them out of our awareness. We could begin simply, working with very ordinary experiences such as walking through a door, taking a bite of food, drinking a cup of coffee, turning the pages of a book. Stop and notice the process taking place. Note where you blank out completely. For instance, what happens when you eat a meal? At first, the food is on the plate, and then it is all in your stomach. How did that happen? You missed the whole transition. First, there was a cup of coffee, and now it's gone. What happened? Where *were* you? First, we were awake, and then we fell asleep and disappeared, and now here we are again! What

happened? First, we were alive, and now we are dead. What happened?

There are many opportunities to work with the experience of change, since every single day is filled with transitions that for the most part go unnoticed. All we need to do is to pause and notice such transitions while they are happening and pay attention to what comes up. When we leave our comfort zone and enter unknown territory, what happens then? Do we experience anxiety, restlessness, or boredom? If so, how do we deal with it? What is it that makes this experience uncomfortable? Notice how difficult it is to stay with it. When we enter unknown territory, rather than immediately trying to pin things down, we could try pausing and letting things *remain* undefined for a moment. Even taking that simple step can begin to loosen our habitual fear of the unknown and undefined.

The more we familiarize ourselves with such undefined moments, the more we can learn to relax with the many gaps in our experience. Instead of covering them over and living in fear, we could make friends with the constant transitions that mark our lives from beginning to end, with no interruption whatsoever. In effect, we are learning to accept death as our constant companion in life.

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### NOTICING DAILY TRANSITIONS

Choose a twenty-four-hour period in which to pay attention to transitions. Begin as you are about to go to bed and continue through the following evening. Notice the process of falling asleep and the flickering between consciousness and unconsciousness as you approach the transition from being awake one moment to being asleep the next. When you wake up in the morning, before you do anything else, pause for a moment and

try to remember what you are doing, and continue where you left off.

Throughout the day, pay attention to the many small transitions you go through. Notice the gaps in your experience, when you seem to blank out. Pay attention to stopping and starting, beginnings and endings, doorways and passages.

Pay attention to your inner world as well, the shifts of thoughts, emotions, and moods, as they come and go.

Try to maintain your awareness through each transition, through each change and transformation. Are you experiencing transitions directly or noticing them after the fact? How does your state of mind change when it is in between experiences? Watch how your awareness comes and goes.

To conclude, spend a few minutes sitting quietly and feeling the movement of your breath as it flows in and out.

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