



(A piece depicting the lord of death from the Buddhism exhibition at the Rubin Museum of Art)

Buddhist & Western attitudes towards Death

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Death is a universal experience among people but the way we express and cope with it is much more nuanced and varied. There are remarkable differences in conceptions and attitudes toward death in Buddhism and western culture. A lot of the difference is built on the philosophical doctrine on which our societies are built. This paper will explore Buddhist conceptions and attitudes toward death and compare them to their western counterparts. We can then see what value they each have to offer to take to our own lives when we are inevitably faced with mortality.

DEATH IN BUDDHISM

One of the most important doctrines of Buddhism is that of the emptiness of all things. There is no permanent substance behind the components of all things and so it is said that they lack a permanent self. This extends to ourselves, where underneath the constituents of the human there is no permanent essence underneath. These ideas extend into people's conceptions of themselves and others. This body is only one part of what makes me up and the energy that flows through me was here before I arrived and will continue after I die. In Buddhism your consciousness did not start with your birth and it will not end with your death. This death is part of the life cycle from which begins a new life. Buddhists believe in reincarnation where the karmic energy we acquire during our life and in the moments before we die determines our next life. It may even lead to reaching liberation from the cycle of suffering and rebirth to uniting with the greater consciousness.

Buddhism encourages us to prepare for death in ourselves and others. The noble truths tell that the nature of life is suffering. There is suffering because we try to hold onto worldly pleasures which are all impermanent and transitory. By becoming enlightened to the impermanent nature of everything we can free ourselves of this suffering. Death is certain and only spiritual development can help us. When we realize that we are as impermanent as anything else there is an understanding that our lives are brief and transitory and that we cannot hold onto anyone else as they too have the same fate. An awareness of life creates life and a fearless death. The inevitability of death prompts one to let go of worldly possessions. Life is a small part of the greater story and death a natural part of the cycle which need not bring such spiritual pain along with it. Education on the logistics of dying and caring for the dead helps overcome the fear of the unknown. This spiritual and practical preparedness improves our experience of death.

Life and death are inseparable. Death can mark the end of life but it also shows that life exists. The buddhist reaction to death often becomes a reminder of the life you have now and gives people a fresh appreciation for life. Often people change their lives when someone close to them dies or they have a near death experience as this brush with mortality reminds them how impermanent their lives are and makes them reevaluate what they truly value.

DEATH IN THE WEST

There is a lot of terror and denial that accompanies death in western culture. We commonly think of death as the end of life. The end of the soul that inhabited that body. Thus there is a strong sense of finality to death and from this finality there stems anxiety of the end of life. We fear the

unknown and in this secular age most of us don't have divine stories to fall back on and reassure us of what lies beyond life. Death is seen as pure nonexistence and so this brings fear and hopelessness near the end of life of the void that surely awaits us. In fact our culture would even say that it is madness not to fear death. We learn that death is to be feared and that when it happens sadness and grief is the appropriate response.

A lot has to do with the prospect of falling apart. We fear to lose our vitality and have our bodies decay and start to fail us. Value is placed on youth and their ability to work and produce. Independence is valued in our culture so we don't want to lose this vitality to provide for ourselves as without it our value is diminished. It's common for the youth to be the most afraid of nearing death in old age as it is this looming anxiety in which they see loss of themselves. This is where a romanticization of dying young comes from, where one can avoid the decay that comes with nearing death.

Death has also been institutionalized. With progress in medicine death became hospitalized and removed from the community. It seemed we could fight against it more effectively. Before this the inevitability of death brought acceptance to the mind earlier but now it seems as though we can take more control over death or at least the timing of death. Because of this, authority over end of life has been taken to hospitals and doctors rather than families and communities. This takes control over life away from those experiencing it and feels like there is less dignity in this stage of life where the main goal is to keep you alive and death feels like a defeat of the doctors.

Around this same time death became a taboo. People didn't talk about it unless they had to and even then would try to indirectly address it. This is still the case today. It's something that's not to be brought up and the appropriate reaction to it is sadness and grief. It's possible that with less belief in the afterlife, death became difficult to deal with spiritually and so people were willing to let it become a medicalized phenomenon which can be dealt with as any other disease. When the person dies it is seen as a failure of health and of the body rather than an inevitable part of life.

DIFFERENCES & SIMILARITIES

However there can be more reactions to death that are okay to have. In Buddhism, many experience a new appreciation for life. Death doesn't have to be destructive. There can be no life without death and vice versa. Trying to deny its inevitability would be an illusion and fleeing from it only ruins the present.

You can see differences in western and eastern, who are commonly Buddhists, family structures. In the West old age is seen as an end to your contribution to society while eastern cultures value older people for their wisdom and life experience. I can't help but think that part of our fear of death comes from the treatment we see of those approaching death. There is a big difference in the east versus west of how those approaching the end of their life are treated and thought of. This seeps into how we imagine ourselves in that position. In Buddhist cultures there is often more family support for those nearing the end of life. People expect there to be a place for them when they get older and that they won't be left alone and in destitution as there is a strong importance placed on the unity of the family which is not the case in the individualistic west.

Older people seem forced to face their mortality and accept its approaching inevitability but it is often the young that become upset thinking of death. It seems like a far away reality that can be put off indefinitely but this clashes when parents become older and wish to address end of life concerns with their children. To prepare for someone close to you to no longer be alive may cause a lot of distress and so it is tempting to put it out of the mind. When death inevitably takes those around us we turn away again, only to have it surround us once our time approaches and there's no choice but to face up and accept our mortality.

We still share many aspects of our reaction to mortality and death. There is often conflict within us where we want to survive and hold on to those close to us and still we wish to find peace with our end and the loss of loved ones. Buddhism seems to be better at coping with death. Death in the west is something that slips under the table until it demands attention. We often hold on tighter rather than accept the inevitability of death and finding peace with it.

WHAT SHALL WE DO

In all fairness it is difficult to let go. We want to hang on to the feelings of those that are gone and not let them fade away. Even in accepting death and believing in an afterlife it is still painful for someone you know to die. That reaction to hold on tighter is often a survival instinct that flares up when we face our mortality so instead of seeing it as an inevitable part of the human experience we react strongly to try to save our own lives and of those around us. So we have the idea that death should be fought against and not accepted.

To find peace in death we must become aware of our attitudes towards death and that there are other ways of looking at it. Then we can accept alternative paths rather than defend against them. This leads to a healthier relationship with mortality. We don't want to accept death because we don't want to accept that there is nothing we can do to stop death from eventually coming for us and those around us, no matter how much we prepare. Yet we still want to find peace in this inevitability and appreciate the life we do have. I think a good balance would be to be existentialists about death. It's a mix of the Buddhist and western approach. We stay deeply invested and attached to life but still accept that which inevitably comes to us, and death comes to us all.

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