

# WHERE DO WE GO WHEN WE DIE?

## *And Who is This / Who Dies?*

We have to learn how to die in every moment in order to be fully alive. This teaching on the middle way is the cream of Buddha's teaching.

—Thich Nhat Hanh



In this  
personal essay,  
**JUDITH TOY** of  
Cloud Cottage Sangha  
in North Carolina  
challenges  
us to look at  
who we  
really aren't.

**A**nonymity, or annihilation of the self, is a prerequisite to fulfillment and happiness said writers and publishers Walter Lowenfels and Michael Fraenkel in Paris in 1929. They might as well have been quoting the Buddha.

The first time I heard the idea of dying to one's ego, or dying into the moment, I was reading about Fraenkel and Lowenfels' now obscure publication project in the Paris of the twenties. Those were heady times. The two men wanted no less than to remodel the world. They would do so by publishing great writers and great literature anonymously, under their Carrefour imprint. Artists, they declared, would merge their creative consciousness into the collective consciousness, and thereby restore everyone's imagination, wonder and joy.

Snuffing out their egos by choosing to remain anonymous, authors would theoretically "die" to their ego, not just once, but many times over, so they could live with integrity and honesty, unburdened by ambition. Brilliant! I thought. The year was 1988, just before I became a student of Thich Nhat Hanh. I became so caught up in the "anonymous" idea that I began my own project, cutting my name off pages and pages of anti-war poems, folding them into neat little packages. I "published" them in hollow trees, under potted plants on neighbor's porches and among the fortune cookies at the grocer.

A poet friend and I secretly hid our anonymous poems inside St. Patrick's Cathedral and among the statuary at Rockefeller Park in New York City. I even went to a drive-in bank window and made a drive-by poetry deposit. Breaking the law, I placed unaddressed poems in the US mails. I put a poem in a ziplock bag and tossed it into the Delaware River like a message in a bottle. Determined to transcend self-consciousness, I would expel the pain and fear of ambition, and survive as pure poetry.

**Walter Lowenfels (1897-1976)** was an American poet and writer whose liberal political thinking not only influenced his writing and editing, but also kept him at the forefront of 20th-century American political artistic movements. In 1930 he and Michael Fraenkel founded the Carrefour Press and published the pamphlet *Anonymous: The Need for Anonymity*, a manifesto in which they declared that anonymous publication was the only way to avoid artistic competition and alienation.

Ironically, the anonymous movement of the twenties imploded as the first arts movement ever to sue itself to death—over copyright claims. My own anonymous movement of the eighties, taken to several major East Coast cities, also ended ignominiously. With no feedback about my work, I felt I was shouting into the void.

Fast forward to Magnolia Village Practice Center in Batesville, Mississippi, June, 2007, where I have been asked to give a dharma talk, “Where Do We Go When We Die?” We are in the midst of a weekend retreat in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, with about 25 retreatants. I had planned to base my talk on Thich Nhat Hanh’s translation of *The Five Remembrances*, from the Anguttara Nikaya, Section 102:

I am of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old. I am of the nature to have ill-health. There is no way to escape ill-health. I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death. All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them. My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground on which I stand. [from *the Plum Village Chanting and Recitation Book*]

The huge dharma hall is hushed and redolent with incense. The seven-foot-high Amida Buddha sits on his lotus throne in perfect serenity. The afternoon air shimmers in sunlight. What happens next astonishes me. The founding Vietnamese family leaders of Magnolia Village, wearing grey practice robes, enter the room with fifteen kids and quietly sit them down for my dharma talk. How am I to explain the five remembrances to children who range wildly in age from

about six to sixteen? How am I to speak to them of death? Knowing it would not be a skillful means to go ahead with my planned talk, I must think of a way to switch gears fast.

I smile at them. “Today we are going to talk about how things are always changing in our lives. According to Buddha, change is something we can count on.



We are all growing older. Can anyone tell me what is happening right now in your lives that is different from how it used to be? Perhaps, for instance, some of you may have moved to a new house, or you will have a new teacher in school next year.” I was reaching for I knew not what.

Billy, about ten years old, raised his hand. I nodded to him. “Our height,” he said.

Everyone laughed and smiled. Billy had come up with a universal children’s metaphor for impermanence!

The ice was broken, and I was able to speak with the kids about mindfulness and the pants that no longer fit—how to accept the sibling who goes from baby to bothersome toddler in one year, how to cope with the stress of the pop quiz at school through calming the body/mind. They seemed to enjoy the interactive chat. Then they were excused by their parents to go outdoors and play. They bowed and left the room. I continued my talk, having survived another round of my-plans-gone-awry, or impermanence.

Perhaps the operative question about death and impermanence is: Who is this I who dies? One of Thich Nhat Hanh’s students in Vietnam approached the Zen master with his palms joined. “Dear Thay,” (Thay is the Vietnamese word for Master or Teacher,) he said, “When

you die, I aspire to build a great stupa in your honor. We will bury your ashes in the stupa. On it, I will place a plaque with the words, ‘Here lies my beloved teacher.’”

Thich Nhat Hanh replied, “I want the plaque to say, ‘Nobody Is Here.’” The teacher makes this reply not to be disingenuous, but to point out our inherent emptiness. Of what, then, are we empty? Even a glass must be empty of something—water, apple juice, milk. The Buddha tells us something rather amazing—we are empty of a separate self.

Right now in our back yard on the garden arbor, hosts of heavenly blue morning glories hold their faces up to the sun. Each has a secret five-pointed white star radiating from a bright yellow center. At night they furl themselves into soft cradles, and sleep. After only a few days of life, each tender bloom dies and falls onto our meditation path, where it is welcomed back to earth to make compost and feed the grass.

If I pick a morning glory and float it in a bowl and look into its face, I can see the sun, the sky, the cloud, the rain and diverse non-flower elements that compose the flower. I can see the distant greenhouse morning glories, her parents, from whose seeds she sprung. I can see the gardener, the packager, the trucker who drove her seed to my store, the store keeper, the stocker of shelves, and the peaceful energy of our sangha who crossed her path as she grew from seed to sprout to vine to flower.

We human beings are morning glories. The secret star at our center is this: we are not really born and do not die.

Thus our birth date could be called a continuation, and our death date could be called a continuation, too. This insight is known as nirvana, the extinction of all theories, the true snuffing out of the ego or the self.

If we do not realize this truth, we become scared, especially if we think we will vanish at death. As a child of about seven or eight, when I first thought of death, I saw an endless long corridor with endless doors. I imagined myself walking down the narrow hall, entering each door only to encounter another long hallway ending in a door. Each door closed with a thud. And there were always more. Was this eternity? I was terrified.

This is why it is important to relieve children, and those who are dying, from their fear. When the layman Anathapindika, a disciple of the Buddha, was dying, the Venerables Ananda and Sariputra went to his home and asked about his pain. Anathapindika said his pain was getting worse. It was clear he was dying. So Ananda and Sariputra set about to allay any fears of death by reminding him:

*These eyes are not me. I am not caught in these eyes.*

*These ears are not me. I am not caught in these ears.*

*This nose is not me. I am not caught in this nose.*

*This tongue is not me. I am not caught in this tongue.*

*This body is not me. I am not caught in this body.*

*This mind is not me. I am not caught in this mind.*

And likewise with the six sense objects—form, sound, smell, taste, contact and thoughts; with the six sense consciousnesses—sight, hearing, and consciousness based on the nose, tongue, body and mind; with the six elements—earth, air, water, fire, space and consciousness; with the five aggregates—form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness; and with the three times—past, present and future.

Anathapindika was so grateful for these teachings that he cried.

Thich Nhat Hanh has put this sutra in a nutshell that we can teach even to children:

*This body is not me.*

*I am not limited by this body.*

*I am life without boundaries.*

*I have never been born,*

*And I have never died.*

When my mother was in a rehabilitation center after her hip fracture and replacement surgery, I often passed the open door of one bare room where I saw a man lay alone, unmoving. At the nurses' station, I asked if the man ever had visitors. "No," said the nurse. "He is dying and has no family." I asked if I might visit. She said yes.

Shyly, I entered the room and began speaking to the man. He was lying on his back with his mouth open, his breath labored. I pulled up a chair and sat down next to his bed. The room smelled of disinfectant and body decay. I began in the middle of the page, as if I had always known him. Describing an ice-encased branch of a maple tree in my mother's back yard, I told him of how the sun shines on the ice, making the branch sparkle. He did not respond.

Then I took his hand, and he faintly squeezed mine. I knew from his touch he had heard me and was glad. When we sit close to a person dying, we can remind them of something happy in their lives. If we do not know them, still we can share the beauty of earth and sky, our common ground.

If we diligently focus on the question of where do we go when we die, and where do we go after we die, we will lose our fear of death. Then we can ask ourselves ----- empty. Therefore the communication be-

It is useless to proceed until we ourselves have an understanding of where we go when we die. We cannot help by simply reciting a sutra. Reciting a sutra without understanding is sending anonymous poems down river in ziploc bags, or shouting into the void.

The great Mahatma Gandhi was approached by a young mother and her overweight son. The mother said, "Dear Mahatma, will you ask my son to stop eating sugar?"



Gandhi replied, "Come back in a month."

In a month, the mother returned with her son. "Please, dear Mahatma," she repeated, "Will you ask my son to stop eating sugar?" Gandhi turned to the boy and asked him respectfully to stop eating sugar.

The mother bowed to Gandhi. Then she asked, "Why did you make us wait for one month?"

"I had to stop eating sugar," he replied.

*We cannot help others drop their fear of death until we can do so ourselves.* And how do we drop our fear? We can meditate deeply on the flowers. We begin to see we are like the morning glory, both a discrete and indiscrete entity, both dependent and independent, with and without form.

*When we join our palms to make a lotus bud, to bow with all our hearts to thank another, we embody this wisdom: we are not one and not two.* There is no inside and no outside. Joining our palms is a kind of body prayer and an affirmation of emptiness, or no separate self. We vow to help our mothers and sisters lose their fear of loneliness, to help our children and fathers and brothers drop their fear of dying and are also saying, as in the Ti-

tween them is inexpressibly perfect.

After some years of living, we are sure to die. If we think this only signals the end of our life, we are wrong. We die, but we do not die. Both body and mind drop like the morning glory onto the earth to be renewed. Life and death, mind and body, are two sides of the same circle of life.

*The twelfth of the twelve links of interdependent co-arising taught by the Buddha is old age and death, jaramarana. This word sounds gentle, melodious.* It echoes the melting of the fallen morning glory back into earth. Among the aggregates—form, feeling, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness—there is nothing we could rightly call a self. In Buddhist practice, when we do not realize this truth, we say this is ignorance, *avidya*. Ignorance, the first of the twelve links, is often represented by artists as a blind woman. The last, or twelfth link of old age and death, is sometimes drawn as a man carrying a corpse on his back.

*The Buddha explained we should not attach to our bodies.* Nor should we attach to the desires that arise from our bodies, since attachment causes *dukkha*, suffering. To free ourselves from the constant round of birth and death and pain, *samsara*, we need to discover for ourselves the truth of impermanence. This is why

*Hence their pacification is tranquility.* Likewise, Lowenfels and Fraenkel believed that by means of “spiritual suicide” one could destroy the self that clings, transcend self-consciousness, drop pain and fear, and survive as both themselves and something outside themselves. This they planned to achieve through literature. Their plans were thwarted, though, when, like the great tempter Mara, form and ego came into play. They began to focus more on copyrights than anonymity. They had forgotten how to “die in every moment.”

*Literature is one way we perpetuate ourselves.* The fact is that at the same time we are dying, we are constantly perpetuating ourselves. When we practice walking meditation here at Cloud Cottage, our practice center, the cells of our bodies drop onto the path and mix with the morning glory husks to feed the new crop of grass. The peace-filled presence of the *sangha* also helps transform the energy of a Cherokee massacre that happened not far from here on the Trail of Tears in 1838.

Every moment of our lives is a moment of meeting and parting. We bequeath our heart, mind and practice energy to others in our family, *sangha*, workplace, monastery. Before, during and after our lives in this go-round, we are present in

interbeing, we are on the path of light, holding hands with the Buddha. In this moment I am not only receiving the teachings, I am receiving the feelings of others—the wind through my office window, the scent of autumn, the energy of earth, all the non-self elements that compose me. As one poet put it, I am a woman in the direct path of a battery of signals.

So there is input, (reception), and output, (sharing,) as in the process of photosynthesis of the plants and trees, the interplay of sunlight, water and oxygen. We need the trees for breath itself—the oxygen of the tree. To be, we must interbe. Just as in the breath—inspiration and exhalation. All life is this dance.

Every day I take my dogs for a hike on the trails in our Southern Appalachian mountains. I do as they do—once in a while I squat to pee. I offer the roots of the tree my bodily fluids, sometimes with a one-word prayer, “Here.” So whether I am cooking or hiking or peeing, all these are dharma doors. The sutras say there are 84,000 such doors. Thich Nhat Hanh has offered us this gatha:

Urinating in the ultimate dimension, there is a wonderful exchange.

Of course the ultimate dimension, the Pure Land, is none other than *here and*

**When causes and conditions are sufficient, there is a manifestation of a flower, and when conditions are no longer sufficient, the manifestation is interrupted.**

I chose to talk with the children about the changing nature of dharmas. Their parents enjoyed contemplating impermanence, too.

*The Buddha said, “Impermanent indeed are all conditioned things; they are of the nature to arise and pass away. Having come into being, they cease to exist.*

numberless beings throughout the ten directions. “There is no place you have not walked,” says Thich Nhat Hanh.

So it is important to look at the five remembrances and ask ourselves while we are still alive, where do I go? If our practice is I-driven, it is based on a separate self. If it is inspired by the mutuality of

*now.* As I pee, I become the tree and the tree becomes me. This is the mutual nourishment, the unadorned miracle of the morning glory.

*To water the morning glory, the cloud had to die to itself.* If we take the cloud out of the morning glory, we won’t have the flower. The flower is flying now in

# Every moment of our lives is a moment of meeting and parting.

the autumn sky; it lives in all its causes and conditions—rain and cloud, and all that lives outside the clouds—earth and sun.

If we had no rainwater, we could not have the morning glory. This is Zen-seeing. Where is the morning glory in the cloud? Where do we go when we die? These are one and the same question. Standing majestically on the waves of birth and death, we are not drowned. We are able to wipe clean all anxiety and fear. I do not come from anywhere. Or, in the obverse, I come from everywhere!

Are there 15 morning glories or one? Are they the same or different? Trying to apply these questions to our own lives, we become caught. Remember that one seed can grow a vine of many flowers. A seed is only one point of energy, expanding. The flower is not the same as a moment ago, because the wind has changed, the light of the sun has changed.

Alice in Wonderland said, "I knew who I was when I woke up this morning, but I must have changed several times since then." No two moments of the bloom are the same. Yet they are not different.

When causes and conditions are sufficient, there is a manifestation of a flower, and when conditions are no longer sufficient, the manifestation is interrupted. The morning glory falls. At the same time, a new manifestation appears, the new grass fed by the "dead" flower.

*The aim of our Buddhist practice is to die to the moment, to wake up to the lovely organic flow that is the nature of impermanence.* The five remembrances help us do this every day. And we see that the nature of impermanence is the nature of non-self that Fraenkels and Lowenfel—and I were reaching for. Do we come back after we die? Yes, the truth is that we already exist simultaneously in all dimensions, all directions. When we clap our hands, the stars can hear our joyful noise.

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