

# Introduction

(v. 2)

The “Great Matter of Life and Death,” as the Buddhist expression puts it, has probably been a subject of great concern to humans as long as we have existed.

Rennyō, a 15<sup>th</sup>-century Japanese Buddhist priest of the Pure Land tradition, wrote many letters to the lay people under his care. This is one of them:

When we pause to think of our floating life, it is a fleeting thing; its beginning, middle, and end pass by in a single season, like an illusion.

Thus, who has ever heard of anyone living 10,000 years? A life passes so easily. Who today has kept their bodily form for 100 years? Death may come to me before you, or to you before me. It may be today, or it may be tomorrow. Whether after another or before another, our lives, it could be said, fall more often than raindrops on the roots of trees, than the dew on the tips of leaves.

So, even though your face is radiant and healthy in the morning, your body may turn to white bones in the evening. Already, the wind of impermanence is blowing; your two eyes close in an instant, your breath ceases forever. Your complexion changes; its ripeness, like that of a peach or plum, is lost. When this moment comes, your dear family gathers to weep and mourn, but to no avail.

Since it must be so, your body is burned to ashes and ends in smoke; only the white bones are left. Pitiably it is, to be sure, and unsatisfying in the extreme. Will you be old or young then? No one knows, so fleeting is human life. Then we should all make haste to take this Great Matter of life and death to heart, and call upon Amida Buddha for mercy. Meditate on the name of “Amida.”

My profound respects to you.<sup>1</sup>

Centuries before, and on the other side of the world, the Jewish Psalmist wrote:

Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is: that I may know how frail I am.

Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah.

<sup>1</sup>“White Bones Letter”; my translation

Surely every man walketh in a vain shew: surely they are disquieted in vain: he heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them.

And now, Lord, what wait I for? My hope is in thee.<sup>2</sup>

And the writer known as “Isaiah” wrote:

The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field:

The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass.

The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.<sup>3</sup>

Two religious traditions from opposite sides of the earth and centuries apart in time, but basically very similar meditations: a sober reflection on the brief, fleeting nature of life, balanced with a mention of some kind of religious consolation. Though the language of the latter is different in the two traditions, one mentioning a Buddha and the other the Jewish God, it may very well be that, since the feelings expressed seem to be universal human ones, the words “Buddha” and “God” might actually be meant to refer to somewhat similar entities.

Both of these voices describe the reality of death in vivid, realistic images. At least, no one can dispute their depictions of what we observe happening to the body when death comes. But both writers seem to imply that death involves more than this, that there is some further part of the story of death that our empirical view of the body withering and fading cannot verify.

Is that hopeful continuation of the story a matter of fact or is it merely a belief that has no justification, as skeptics of religions insist? And might there be other ways of coming to terms with the fact of universal death besides this combination of acceptance of sorrowful reality with transcendent hope, which seems to be the natural way we confront death in all times and places: ancient Israel, medieval Japan, and today?

This is the question I want to focus on in this book, looking for insights in three classic writings on death:

*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, written in Mesopotamia perhaps 4,000 years ago;

the letters by the Apostle Paul in the Christian New Testament, written 2,000 years after that, and

a very important classic text of Zen Buddhism, the *Shobogenzo*, or *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, written by Eihei Dogen, the founder of the Japanese Soto Zen tradition,

<sup>2</sup>Psalm 39:4–7; King James Version

<sup>3</sup>Isaiah 40:6–8; King James Version

in the 13th Century, C.E.

I will also fill in some context before and between these writings:

first, what experts in prehistoric anthropology think might have preceded such stories of gods and humans as the Gilgamesh epic, before writing was first invented and records of these tales began to be created;

second, the birth of Western science in Greece, between the era of that story and the origins of Christianity, and how I see Paul as reacting to the scientific understanding of human beings as it had developed by his time; and

third, the historical and cultural background to Dogen's remarkable version of Buddhist traditions.



One question that we will be devoting particular attention to is the connection between death and religion, which is considered a very close one by many, if not nearly all, people. For example, the quotations at the beginning of this chapter seem to provide solid evidence of this link. However, we do not necessarily need to think of death in religious terms. As we shall see, it is possible to reflect seriously on the subject of death in general, and our own individual fates in particular, without buying into any particular religion, or any religion at all.

For many of us, a strong motivation for thinking of the subject of death in religious terms is very clear: we are afraid of death, “a necessary end” that “will come when it will come,” as Shakespeare’s Caesar reflects, and strongly desire a happy next chapter after this apparent end. The quotations we started with make this clear. To read still another text expressing this desire, consider the “Mourner’s Kaddish” from the Jewish tradition.

May His great Name grow exalted and sanctified in the world  
which will be renewed,

And where He will resuscitate the dead and raise them up to the  
eternal life,

And rebuild the city of Jerusalem and complete His Temple  
within it, and uproot alien worship from the earth,

And return the service of Heaven to its place and where the Holy  
One, Blessed is He, will reign in His sovereignty and splendor,

In your lifetimes and in your days, and in the lifetimes of the

entire Family of Israel, swiftly and soon. Now respond: Amen. ... <sup>4</sup>

We can clearly see in the Kaddish a number of ideas that many other religious traditions emphasize in expressing their emotions about death.

First, there is the reliance on a divine or other superhuman power, which is clearly needed to somehow conquer the seemingly unavoidable evil of the total extinction of life. This power has created the world and can renew or recreate it, removing this evil from it.

Second, however, we have a responsibility to satisfy if this is to happen. This miraculous victory over death does not happen automatically; we must do our part in restoring the purified state of the world, here expressed by the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple in it, which was traditionally the center of Jewish worship, and the disappearance of “alien worship.” (This last is based on the traditional belief that, God being the one and only divine power in the universe, there is only one true way of relating to him.)

Third, this renewal of the world will happen, not only in an unobservable life after death, which we can only “take on faith,” but “in our lifetimes and our days.” It is a renewal of the entire universe we live in, not just something that happens to us as individuals; the whole of the created universe must be thoroughly worked if the possibility of death without survival is to be eliminated. This point is not including in all religious traditions, but it is certainly one that was a central idea of Paul’s and in many was formed the core of his way of viewing death, as we will see.

On the other hand, of course, those who often call themselves proudly, or are called by others in derision, “secular humanists” commonly sign onto one or more of the following themes:

The fact (which they take to be a fact) that we have only one limited lifespan makes each day or moment of life much more meaningful and precious than it would be if we could look forward to an extended or possibly endless afterlife. We need not worship or “sanctify” any divinities to appreciate or enjoy the value of our lives

Facing the inevitable fact of our consciousness, our thoughts, feelings, and passions, passing into the void generates (or at least should generate) great compassion toward ourselves and others.

Although we do not live on in an afterlife in some mythical other dimension, as far as we can tell, we do survive in the memories of our families, friends, and all who benefit from the good we have done in our lives (and unfortunately, of course, all who suffer from our evil deeds, though this is rarely mentioned in humanistic funeral orations)

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<sup>4</sup>From <http://www.jewishpathways.com/files/mourning5.pdf>

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In any case, facing reality courageously and with a clear vision is far better than trying to comfort ourselves with fictions.

This secular humanist concept of death threatens many, because it seems to do away with the protection against the forces of nature, especially the causes of illness and death. They believe that this protection derives from a divine creator and governor of the universe. In the world as these humanists see it, death no longer seems to be the door which opens onto an eternal life of sheer enjoyment presided over by that deity, for the righteous, or eternal punishment (pictured in one way or another) for the guilty who have managed to escape retribution for their sins while they lived on earth.

In reply, secularists will sing with Phil Ochs that we must make heaven on earth while we live—don't wait! In the words of his song "When I'm Gone":

There's no place in this world where I'll belong when I'm gone  
And I won't know the right from the wrong when I'm gone  
And you won't find me singin' on this song when I'm gone  
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.

And I won't feel the flowing of the time when I'm gone  
All the pleasures of love will not be mine when I'm gone  
My pen won't pour out a lyric line when I'm gone  
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.

And I won't breathe the bracing air when I'm gone  
And I can't even worry 'bout my cares when I'm gone  
Won't be asked to do my share when I'm gone  
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.

And I won't be running from the rain when I'm gone  
And I can't even suffer from the pain when I'm gone  
Can't say who's to praise and who's to blame when I'm gone  
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.

Won't see the golden of the sun when I'm gone  
And the evenings and the mornings will be one when I'm gone  
Can't be singing louder than the guns when I'm gone  
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.

All my days won't be dances of delight when I'm gone  
And the sands will be shifting from my sight when I'm gone  
Can't add my name into the fight while I'm gone

So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.

And I won't be laughing at the lies when I'm gone  
And I can't question how or when or why when I'm gone  
Can't live proud enough to die when I'm gone  
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here.

The truest form of life, it seems, is one in which the fear of death is wholly absent and one appreciates one's life to the fullest extent possible for as long as it continues.

But how is this fear to be eradicated from our minds? For many, if not most, of us, I would guess, it is not at all as easy to accomplish this as it seems it was for Phil Ochs (granted, he was creating an inspirational song and probably not expressing his true innermost feelings).

In his well-known book *The Denial of Death*, the cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker suggests an explanation of how we commonly keep the subject of our own, personal deaths out of our minds. He distinguishes between the physical identity of our biological life in the world, into which we are born willy-nilly, and our ability to create a symbolic world for ourselves in which we can create an idea of a life after death, which we absolutely must do in order to give our lives any meaning. We thus make ourselves into "heroes" in a mythical or religious world. This works very well to drive the fear of death out of our consciousness as long as we can wholeheartedly believe that this symbolic world is real. As he explains with reference, at least, to one cultural tradition:

Culture is in its most intimate intent a heroic denial of creatureliness. But this denial is more effective in some epochs than in others. When man lived securely under the canopy of the Judeo-Christian world picture he was part of a great whole; to put it in our terms, his cosmic heroism was completely mapped out, it was unmistakable. He came from the invisible world into the visible one by the act of God, did his duty to God by living out his life with dignity and faith, marrying as a duty, procreating as a duty, offering his whole life—as Christ had—to the Father. In turn he was justified by the Father and rewarded with eternal life in the invisible dimension. Little did it matter that the earth was a vale of tears, of horrid sufferings, of incommensurateness, of torturous and humiliating daily pettiness, of sickness and death, a place where man felt he did not belong, "the wrong place," as Chesterton said, the place where man could expect nothing, achieve nothing for himself. Little did it matter, because it served God and so would serve the servant of God.<sup>5</sup>

But now that, for many of us, at least, the symbolic religious world has lost its reality, the problem of the fear of death becomes an urgent one.

(This is not to say, of course, that it was wholly absent from people's spirits until recently. The thought *Memento mori*, Latin for "Keep death in mind," is a constant refrain all over the

<sup>5</sup>Becker, *The Denial of Death*, pp. 159f.

world. But as long as religions have been the predominant way of understanding the self and the world around it, it has always been coupled with the comforts mentioned above.)



Perhaps the most important element in the emotion of death-fear (or, in German, *Todesfurcht* – how I envy the German ability to jam nouns together for every need!) – is the unknowability of whether or not death is truly “the end,” the end of all consciousness and experience, and if not, what we might experience after bodily death.

Some readers might protest that there are such things as “near-death experiences,” and that they may provide some clues to answers to this unknowability. I will discuss this kind of experience in a later chapter, but for now let me just state my position on the issue: as one wag has put it, near-death experiences are related to actual death the same way that near-sex is related to sex – not the same thing at all!

Death lies in the future of everyone, and one might think that the future in general is unknowable, strictly speaking. We think we know that the sun will come up tomorrow, and that this knowledge is based on very sound astronomical theory, as well as what we know about the physical processes that guarantee that the sun will give us as much light and heat tomorrow as it does today. Philosophers, ever eager to push all questions about knowledge to their limits, may claim that there are reasons to hold that the laws of physics are not 100% certain, but in practice no one worries about the possibility that the sun might disappear, or the earth cut loose from its orbit, overnight.

Many other future events, though, are things that we have little or no certainty about. So, in that sense, the future in general is largely unknowable to us, who have an unquenchable thirst to know everything. But death is especially unique among future events in that it is both inevitable (at least, until the computer wizards figure out how to upload our selves into “The Cloud,” and we know very well that computers fail all the time, so that would be little comfort even if it became possible), and at the same time it is an absolutely impenetrable barrier to knowledge.

Actuaries can calculate how many years a person is more likely than not to continue living, based on their statistical records, and one’s physician might venture to tell one that “I give you six months to live” after a cancer diagnosis, but even that small amount of knowledge is impossible where death itself is the subject. If we are diagnosed with a cancer, we can get some notion of our future prospects from the records of other patients with the same condition, but there are no records at all (I am pretty sure) of travelers to “the Other Side” who could tell us what that is like.

In this situation, what reasonable position can we take?

The great question of life and death, of what if anything happens to us after death, seems to have been on the minds of King Edwin of Northumbria, England, and his advisors when they met in 627 to consider whether or not to convert to Christianity, an offer which had been made to them by Paulinus, a missionary sent by Pope Gregory I. The rather well-known story about the advice given to the King by one of his advisors was told by Venerable Bede, in his history of the Christian church in England up to his time. As Bede quotes him, this man was dissatisfied with the information their own religion gave them about life and death, which, it seems, was essentially none:

The present life of man, O king, seems to me, in comparison of that time which is unknown to us, like to the swift flight of a sparrow through the room wherein you sit at supper in winter, with your commanders and ministers, and a good fire in the midst, whilst the storms of rain and snow prevail abroad; the sparrow, I say, flying in at one door, and immediately out at another, whilst he is within, is safe from the wintry storm; but after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, into the dark winter from which he had emerged. So this life of man appears for a short space, but of what went before, or what is to follow, we are utterly ignorant. If, therefore, this new doctrine contains something more certain, it seems justly to deserve to be followed.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the King did decide to convert to Christianity, although it seems that Northumbria reverted to paganism after his time, and it was a while longer before England became securely Christian. Nevertheless, the new belief system from sunny Italy obviously did impress Edwin and his court with its epistemological superiority.



I will close this chapter with three more quotations which will summarize the above and set up a few topics for our consideration in the following chapters.

To be immortal is commonplace; except for man, all creatures are immortal, for they are ignorant of death; what is divine, terrible, incomprehensible, is to know that one is mortal. – Jorge Luis Borges, “The Immortal”<sup>7</sup>

Our inability to imagine our own nonexistence means that an ultimate understanding

<sup>6</sup>Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Book II, Chapter 13.

<sup>7</sup>Shermer, Michael. *Heavens on Earth: The Scientific Search for the Afterlife, Immortality, and Utopia*, Henry Holt and Co.. Kindle Edition, p. 9.

of our own mortality will forever elude us, leaving us to live for the here and now even while the hereafter beckons us.<sup>8</sup>

And finally, a Zen koan about a Chinese Buddhist priest and his teacher, who, if the story is true (always an open question with koans!), may have lived at about the same time as King Edwin, or somewhat later.

Priest Jianyuan of Tan once accompanied his teacher, Daowu, on a condolence call to a family funeral. When they arrived, he tapped the coffin and said, "Is this life, or is this death?"

Daowu said, "I won't say life, I won't say death."

Jianyuan said, "Why won't you say?"

Daowu said, "I won't say, I won't say."

On their way back Jianyuan said, "You should say it quickly for me, teacher, or I will hit you."

Daowu said, "Hit me if you will, but I will not say." Jianyuan hit him.

After returning to the monastery Daowu said to Jianyuan, "You should take leave for a while; I'm afraid if the head monk finds out about this he will make trouble for you."

After Daowu passed away, Jianyuan went to see Daowu's successor Shishuang, told him the story, and asked for guidance. Shishuang said, "I won't say life, I won't say death."

Jianyuan said, "Why won't you say it?"

Shishuang said, "I won't say, I won't say." Jianyuan immediately realized it.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>9</sup>Quoted from Roshi John Daido Looi's discussion of the koan at <http://www.mro.org/zmm/teachings/daido/teisho12.php>