

On death, dying – and living

by DEVAN NAMBIAR

*When you are born you cry,
But the whole world overjoys.
When you die, the world cries
But may you find great liberation.*

- A TIBETAN QUOTE

Death Death is an integral part of life. Death conjures up many different emotions – anger, sadness, and a profound sense of loss, to name a few. Diverse cultures and religions attach various meanings to death and its process. It does not discriminate according to race, gender, culture, socio-economic status, age, life-style, sexual orientation, religion, or spirituality. If we accept it, then it is life.

East and West In the '90s we have started to acknowledge death and the process of dying as a part of life, a process to be honoured. Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism view death as an extension of life. They see the physical body as matter in a state of vibration. Upon cessation of the physical, the spiritual (subtle or astral body) moves on. According to these beliefs, we are energy beings and the energy is never destroyed, only recreated. Most of us believe we are more than the physical mass. But the challenge has been to explain, quantify, or measure the “soul” essence.

Cross-cultural rituals Different religions have different ceremonies, some

simple, some elaborate. We spend a lot of money on the dead. Most of these expensive ceremonies are for the living, as an expression of love and guilt. In my travels, I have witnessed different ceremonies with similar but distinct religious differences.

In Bali in 1992, my partner and I witnessed a cremation ceremony. Women and men, dressed in their colourful finery, led the procession to the seashore. No one wore the traditional “all black” garb of the West. Draped in white cloth, the body lay on a bed of firewood in a four-by-four made of banana tree trunks. People chanted, sang, and played local music. The air was infused with the smell of frankincense and flowers. The ceremony went on for over three hours. A priest continued the chanting while the funeral pyre was lit. We sat there mesmerized. The sea breeze fanned the fires to a great height. It was sublime and powerful: ashes to ashes.

My father's funeral ceremony, also in 1992, was Hindu/Buddhist. He was bathed, dressed with prayer beads and flowers, and laid facing east to the rising sun. In the evening, under the guidance of the priest, we lit camphor and carried an oil lamp as we walked around him, guiding him on his journey. He was cremated and his ashes scattered both in his hometown in Malaysia and in India.

A year later, I participated in the Christian funeral ceremony for my partner.

AIDS and the grieving process Most of us have lost friends, colleagues, partners, and lovers to AIDS. The multiple grieving processes take their toll. The grieving process can take years filled with pain, alienation, depression, sadness, loneliness, and even

Making an offering to the spirits at a Hindu funeral in Bali.

hopelessness. Time does heal the pain. Our experiences give us strength. That experience is our teacher or “guru”, which in Sanskrit means remover of ignorance. All life-changing experiences are teachers unto us. In cultivating awareness, we can experience all facets of life, joy, and pain. In my personal experience, it is an honour to be in the presence of a dying person. It reveals an insight into a very intimate part of life's process. A moment to be revered and an experience that deepens our existence in this world.

Living like it is your last day I am coming to see death in the same light as birth, but with one difference – it is our permanent exit from physical existence if we die with grace and awareness. When we fully live a life, we live with no regrets. As Gautama Buddha said, “This existence of ours is as transient as autumn clouds. To watch the birth and death of beings is like looking at the movements of a dance. A lifetime is like a flash of lightning in the sky.” ❖

Devan Nambiar has been actively involved in HIV advocacy, research, and integrative health. He has proactively utilized integrative health modalities in optimizing his health and sharing this knowledge.



RECOMMENDED READING

1. The Silent Sun, Who Am I? by Ramana Maharishi
2. Who Dies? by Steven Levine
3. Death and Dying by Elizabeth Kubler Ross
4. Tibetan Book of Living and Dying by Soygal Rinpoche
5. Gay Body, A Journey through Shadow & Self by Mark Thompson
6. It Is All Right by Isabel M. Hickey