

Let the dead bury their dead

A turning-point in Buddhist history is when the Buddha-to-be sees the three sights of an old man, a sick man, and a dead man (personifications for life's three ills, the 3 D's: decay, disease and death), and then he sees a pleasant and peaceful looking holy man. The Buddha-to-be realizes he should leave his world of luxury behind to dedicate all his energies to discovering the cause and end of suffering.

There is a related story in the Christian Bible to this poignant moment in humanity's religious journey, found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Jesus sees a great crowd gathering and gives orders to go to the other side of the sea of Galilee. One of his disciples excuses himself saying that he has to bury his dead father. Jesus' reply to him has often troubled many, "Follow me and let the dead bury their dead." However, if we really open our hearts, these words have great spiritual significance.

We have a choice of how to understand these words. There is a narrow polemical view (that those who do not share our confession, those who do not believe religion in the way we do, are "spiritually dead"; have nothing to do with them). Or, there is a broader spiritual view that applies to everyone, no matter what religion we have, or none at all.

We tend to seek what is dead. We sometimes wonder about the dead, about death; we wonder what would happen to us when we die. Thankfully, such thoughts come and go, especially when we are distracted by other things. On a deeper level, we tend to live in the past, so that the present eludes us. How often when we meet someone, especially someone we do not like, we tend to think of her or him in negative terms – because our minds are fixated on some negative past event. Had we chosen to think of something happy about this same person, we would not have felt so negative. In short, we need to leave the dead buried.

The Buddha went through a lot to let go of the dead, to look for the true life, and he found it deep in his heart in his self-awakening. In a sense, since he has gone as far as any human could go in giving up everything, including sacrificing countless past lives, to seek the liberating truth, we need not do so much for our own salvation. We only need to look within ourselves for that true inner stillness, living in the present. One great way to do this is to feel the peaceful presence of our beautiful breath, and leave the dead behind us.

On a still deeper level, we need to examine how we think. We tend to see things in a fixed and measured way. Instead of seeing a beautiful flower by the path, we see it standing cut in vase on our table. Or, instead of seeing a running brook or enjoying a glorious sunset, we freeze it into dead pixels in our digital camera.

Much of our lives are made up of what we choose to pay attention to. If we choose to remember those who have hurt us, then we are still controlled by them. Our lives are too brief and too precious to allow the dead to rule us. Instead, we should give this privilege (an exclusive reserve), this vital attention and memories, to those whom we love and care for (including ourselves). We should think and feel for those who really matter to us, and leave the dead behind, just as the Buddha left his palaces and princely life behind.

Above all, we need to leave our dead ideas about ourselves behind. We might feel as if we are helpless as we face life's outrageous misfortunes. Then there are those who reinforce this notion, telling us that we are not good enough, that we need to seek some external agency, such as a deity, prayers, a guru, a fortune-teller, a seance, feng-shui, money, and so on.

Our life is too sacred and fragile to be placed into the hands of any other. We have to take charge of our own life, if we want to be the one truly living it. The Buddha makes a clear statement that we *can* and *should* take charge of our own life (Dh 160).¹ We begin to take charge of our own life by leaving what is dead buried. Let the past go: it is gone; the future has not yet come.

All that we are, all that we can be, are in the present moment. This present moment is an open window through which we can not only see all the goodness we are capable of, but also act on it. Live the present well, then our past becomes valuable lessons and the future a living reward.

One moment a thought arises, the next it is dead. Thoughts come and go. "Worry" is when we try to hold or to freeze what has to move on. We are still an on-going process. We cannot hold our breaths, not for too long anyway. We live by letting go of every breath so that the next may come. When the final breath comes in its rightful time, we have fully breathed this life. Our debt to life is paid, as it were, so that we are truly at peace (Tha 1002 f).² This is called nirvana.

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¹ The self is the master of the self, | for, who else could the master be? | with a self that is well-tamed, indeed, | one gains a master that is hard to find. (Dh 160). See **Spiritual friendship: A textual study** = SD 34.1(5.2): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/34.1-Spiritual-friendship-a-textual-study-piya.pdf>

² I delight not in death, nor do I delight in life; | I shall cast aside this body fully aware and mindful. || I delight not in death, nor do I delight in life; | I await my time as a servant his wages. (Tha 1002 f)