

Farewell Leonard Wong

When I heard the news that a promising 26-year-old close family friend had died in an accident, I was simply at a loss – like Ānanda when he hears that the elder Sāriputta has passed away; again when the elder Cunda has passed away, and again when he learns that the Buddha will soon pass away. And Ānanda is a streamwinner, while I am only an aspirant to streamwinning:

“Bhante, I have seen the Blessed One enjoying comfort, and I have seen the Blessed One patiently enduring. And, bhante, my body has become weak [unwieldy] as if drugged [drunk]. I’m disoriented and things are unclear to me as a result of the Blessed One’s illness.”¹

So, too, when I heard that Leonard Wong Chee Wai had died in a biking accident on 24th September 2016, just two days before his 26th birthday. I was having my dinner with my family in a neighbourhood hawker centre when the sad news came to us. I was unable to continue eating. My mind seemed to have stopped thinking. It was just sadness – a numbing feeling.

Tragic moments like this attract memories of more tragic moments. How a young cousin in Melaka, Malaysia, fell from his bicycle on the road between Melaka and Port Dickson; then, fell into a coma and never woke up again. Another Singaporean friend, in his early 20’s who died broken hearted at his mother’s grave. And a still-born baby for whom I conducted the last rites, when I was a Theravada monk.

Only later, after meeting the bereaved mother and father (they were divorced), and other family friends, and talking with them, consoling them, sharing our loving memories of Leonard – only then, I began to feel the ground of being again.

At that moment of loss, it seems as if all the years of Dharma I have learned is forgotten. Perhaps I feared that knowing all words alone could not explain why a healthy, intelligent, popular and promising young man should die so suddenly, so violently, on an open highway in another country, so far away from home.

He was riding his Ducati Hypermotard 821, following five other friends, on the North-South Highway near Seremban, Malaysia, on the way for a holiday on Fraser’s Hill, about 105 km north of Kuala Lumpur. His biker friend ahead of him had signalled that there was a tyre (from the wheel of a van) in the middle of the road in front of them. At that very moment, Leonard has just overtaken a bus, and had turned his head to check his blind spot. So he did not see the front rider’s signal.

Leonard’s bike hit the tyre and he was flung off his bike. His Ducati crashed into the road divider and burst into flames. He died shortly after. The ambulance took half an hour to arrive. Perhaps, he could have been saved if it had arrived earlier.²

Leonard’s wake was held from 25-27 September 2016 in Jurong East. More than 150 people came on the first day to pay their respects to him. On the first night, the Ehipassiko Chanting

¹ **Mahā,parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16,2.24/2:99), [SD 9](#).

² Straits Times (Singapore) report: <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/sporean-biker-dies-after-motorcycle-crashes-into-road-divider-in-malaysia>. Earlier, on 10 Sep 2016, another young Singaporean, 22, died on the same North-South Highway, in Johor, Malaysia: <http://www.stomp.com.sg/singapore-seen/from-around-the-world/sporean-who-died-in-johor-accident-was-a-safe-driver-says-dad>.

Group (ECG)³ conducted a meaningful memorial puja. On the second night, suttas were beautifully chanted by Sinhalese monks, ending with a dedication of merits.

After a short break, we gathered again after I proposed that we have a eulogy session for the family. This was my best opportunity to publicly thank the Lim family for inviting us to move over from Malaysia to Singapore to continue Dharma work, and for their constant support. I also shared my memories of Leonard when he was only 10, when our family lived with his family as guests of his mother, Hong Geok, and supported by his uncle, Soon Kiat, his aunt, Hong Choo, and others.

Then, Soon Kiat, Leonard's closest uncle, gave his eulogy. Smiles and tears mingled with the tenor of the memories and messages. His cousins, Jasmine Lim and Eugene Lim (both siblings) – all lovingly raised by Leonard's mother, were inseparable companions – were too grief-stricken to find the words to express their loss, but were dignified in their courageous presence.

At the close of the family eulogy session, we sang the birthday song for Leonard in English and Mandarin Chinese. He would have turned 26 that day. After the singing, his father, James Wong, broke down in tears and was comforted by relatives. Leonard's mother gently touched his shoulder.

On the last day, just before the funeral, there was a Chinese Mahayana service. Then, the undertakers in their well-worn uniform grey suits professionally conducted the customary Chinese final rites for everyone assembled. The cortege then moved at a respectfully slow pace along the housing estate road and some distance into the main road of the Jurong East neighbourhood.⁴ Then, just before the cortege was ready to move off at the normal traffic speed, some got into their cars to follow the cortege, while most of us boarded two large buses.

We headed for the Mandai Crematorium and Columbarium Complex.⁵ The cortege led the way followed closely by two neat rows of 14 bikers as convoy of honour, followed by some cars and then our buses. The bikers rode with such dignity, reflecting their love and respect for one of their youngest members. Love and trust make us the best relatives (Dh 204).⁶

It was at this point, tears welled up in my eyes, recalling how close they must have been to one another, and how they now missed Leonard. So many pained by the love for just one so special.

According to the "Online Applications" for the Mandai Crematorium, Leonard's cremation was scheduled for 1.15 pm in Hall 1, which had a total of 9 other cremations. Hall 2 had 12 crema-

³ This is a free lay initiative to provide Theravada Buddhist last rites and related services for the public, upon request: <http://www.buddhistfellowship.org/web/services/>.

⁴ Interestingly, in Singapore, we are more free to have such a funeral procession on public roads, whereas in Malaysia, a police permit is needed, and police escort for traffic control is also provided.

⁵ Singapore's first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, and his wife were also cremated in this crematorium and their ashes interred in its Columbarium, along with those of a number of other dignitaries: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandai_Crematorium_and_Columbarium. Related information can be found here: <http://www.nea.gov.sg/public-health/care-for-the-dead/other-death-related-matters/burial-cremation-ash-storage>.

⁶ Dhammapada verse 204: "The trusted [familiar] are the best relatives" (*vissāsa, paramā ñātī*).

tions, and Hall 3 had 13 for the day. Each of the cremation services were 45 minutes apart. The crematorium was very well-designed with spacious halls, seats, and koi pools.

Hall 1 was large looking like a lecture theatre, and comfortably seated at least 200 people. The coffin was brought through another passageway. The public eulogies followed, and some of Leonard's many friends spoke, too. In fact, nearly half the assembly were young people who knew Leonard. On this account, Leonard's mother, when the funeral was over, remarked to my wife, Ratna, "Now I know why he had so little time for me!"

When all the eulogies have been said, the coffin moved by itself through the doors into the cremation chamber. The funeral director then invited us into the viewing chamber. This was the most emotional moment, as we watched the coffin slowly departed alone through the doors into the inner chamber for cremation. There were sporadic shouts of good wishes and love for our dearly departed young Leonard. "Let us not say good bye to him, but fare well. For, if we truly love him, we will all meet happily again," I said in my public eulogy.

What can we helpfully say about the premature passing of such a special person and to console the bereaved? Religion can only explain such a loss but for its own good, not really for the wisdom of the bereaved. Chinese status-based superstition even forbade seniors from participating in any last rites for their deceased young! Without closure, there is often the high emotional cost of perpetual mourning – like those unable to accept the Buddha's death.⁷

How can we console someone who has lost an only child – like Kisā Gotamī of the Buddha's own time. The Buddha teaches her to accept her child as he really is: only in doing so, she is truly healed, and awakens to true reality.⁸

No child, no parent, no person can really be our refuge – only the Dharma, our self-understanding and seeing life as it really is – can heal us. We must simply bear with courage the fact that no religion can satisfactorily console us in our irreplaceable loss. It can only distract us with some promises of the deceased "going to a better place," or that those whom the gods love, die young. But grief diluted with delusion only makes us forget the real lesson of our loss.⁹

The loss of our dearly beloved reminds us of our humanity, that we are vulnerable to time and twist of life. If we think that our loss is painful, it only means that we hold that person with value and love. Since value and love are memories, we can keep them so that they continue to enrich our lives even after the physical being is no more. It is our humanity and vulnerability that teach us how to be like the Buddha and walk his path.

Our beloved must depart, but for the moment, on a journey that he alone must take. Alone we arrive in this life, and alone we depart into a new one. We never really die: we are reborn. In time, we meet again – just as we, the living, are together now. As our faith and love grow for one another, every new meeting brings us closer, bonded together by our love for the Dharma.

We have walked together thus far on this path of love, you and I. Our love is how well and wisely we love one another along the journey. At some point, we each turn into a path that we

⁷ On the problems of not accepting the Buddha's death, see Reflection R420, [Family history](#), 2015.

⁸ See [Kisā Gotamī](#), SD 43.2: [sutta](#), [YouTube talk](#).

⁹ See [Paṭācārā](#), SD 43.3: [sutta](#), [YouTube talk](#).

alone must take. There is no goodbye, only farewell – our journey has not yet ended as the path is still open before us. We will meet again in love and joy, Leonard.

My tale was heard and yet it was not told,
My fruit is fall'n, and yet my leaves are green,
My youth is spent and yet I am not old,
I saw the world and yet I was not seen:
My thread is cut and yet it is not spun,
And now I live, and now my life is done. Tichborne's Elegy (1586)¹⁰

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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¹⁰ By Chidioc Tichborne (1558-1586), written before his execution for participating in the Babington conspiracy to assassinate Elizabeth I to replace her with Mary as queen of England.
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