

The art of dying

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What Eastern philosophy can teach us

I'm not talking about the 'Eastern Philosophy' offered by self-styled gurus who present common sense as universal truths to a slew of admirers for a hefty fee. No, ancient, Eastern wisdom is accessible free of charge – with just one catch ... we have to do the work. 'No mud, no lotus,' as the saying goes. And why should insight come easily? Why should the touch of a peacock feather or the gaze of an ornately costumed 'master' (whose only credential is charisma) rid anyone of decades of imperfect thinking and behaviour? True philosophy cannot bestow a quick fix on anyone.

One might say Eastern philosophy offers the very thing we seek to avoid: death. Death of the infinite ways our thinking and behaviours are self-serving; death of our worldly desires and attachments; death or – as one Hindu monk puts it – the suicide of the ego.

In the Western-influenced world, talk of death is discouraged. It's viewed as morose. Bodies of the deceased are hidden. Cremation pyres where corpses are burned in full view of the public (commonplace in India's Varanasi) are deemed peculiar. And don't try to discuss the Buddhist meditation one practitioner told me about, where he sat looking at a corpse for hours. It was a gruelling exercise, he said. It forced him to face his mortality.

Albert Camus wrote, 'In the midst of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer'. In the East there is also the remembrance that, at the height of summer, exists the quiet presence of winter. Travel to India and you'll notice those who only wear the colour gerua, or orange. These are Swamis – the monks and nuns of Hinduism. The colour serves to remind them of the embers of a cremation fire and their undertaking to commit to the ongoing task of dying to a worldly life with its myriad of attachments. For those around them, they serve as a symbol of the ultimate death within life, the ongoing work of shedding of the false self or ego.

In the Zen Buddhist tradition, monks, samurais and scholars write poems in the moments before they die. These concise reflections are known as jisei. This one was written by Chikamasa:

One day you are born
 you die the next -
 today,
 at twilight,
 autumn breezes blow.

Such death poems might seem banal to the untrained eye. Where is the outpouring of emotion of wordy, Western elegies, the celebration of the departed? The difference is that in the East, the absence of individualised importance is valued. Moving beyond a small sense of self, the ego no longer clouds the mind's perception. In this state of equanimity, the poet faces physical death with calm, penning the insights that present themselves at this time.

For many raised with an Eastern outlook, death is neither shunned or elevated. Many accounts present death as a passage to insight. In thirteenth century Persia, the Sufi scholar Jelaluddin Rumi experienced the loss of his spiritual teacher, Shams of Tabriz. Historical accounts vary: some say Shams vanished mysteriously; others that he was murdered by Rumi's jealous disciples. Either way, Rumi found himself in a state of inconsolable despair as he mourned his teacher's death. Out of this grief, poems began to pour from his lips. He did not contemplate what to say; these poems were spontaneous expressions of his longing for his departed teacher. Rumi travelled to Damascus but found nothing there. He did, however, have the

epiphany that Shams' influence or presence remained alive within him. 'I am the same as He!' wrote Rumi. He understood that death and the state of longing were illusory.

In 1896, in Madurai, 16-year-old Venkataraman (later known as Ramana Maharishi, the silent sage of India) was on the first storey of his family house, with his brother's wedding celebrations going on below, when he was seized by an overwhelming fear of death. He was in good health at the time. There was nothing to account for this sudden terror. He chose to enquire into the nature of his fear which brought to him the realisation that the death he feared was of the body; that the true Self is not bound by the body. He wrote:

All this was not dull thought; it flashed through me vividly as living truths which I perceived directly almost without thought process. I was something real, the only real thing about my present state ... Fear of death vanished once and for all. The ego was lost in the flood of Self-awareness.

Six weeks after this experience, Venkataram left his home and family for what is known as the sacred mountain of Arunachala in Tiruvannamalai. He hid in a cave there, under the ancient temple, entered a deep state of meditation and attained enlightenment.

E.M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India* is set in colonial India, before the country's independence. It centres on the experience of two British women in the Marabar caves: difficult to put in words, one might call this a death experience too. In their different ways, the women's previous views are eroded by the emptiness of the cave, which renders all sounds into 'boom', an echo 'entirely devoid of distinction'. Their neat mental divisions between life and death, between absence and presence, between certainty and doubt, no longer hold. The younger woman Adela experiences this as a violation which leads her to falsely accuse the host, Aziz, of rape. The older Mrs Moore sinks into 'apathy and cynicism'. She discerns the cracks in her religious framework and in the false values of the world. Each woman faces a crisis of identity all the more difficult to navigate without a philosophy that venerates the death of self.

I was fortunate to spend time with the monk, the late Swami Vimalananda Saraswati, in the north of India. One of his duties in his earlier years at the institute where he lived and served was to dispose of the bodies of his fellow Swamis when they died. While Hindus are given an Antyeshti ritual (funeral rite) at the time of death, no such rites are given to Swamis who, after becoming renunciates and donning the orange cloth, are considered 'dead already'. So Swami Vimalananda would place each body into a bag, weight it down with stones, and dispose of it in the river Ganges. He spoke about this task with a mix of reverence and humour. There was no denial of death; there was neither a degradation nor an elevation of dying. Having contemplated his own transience, he saw death in perspective – as an inevitable part of life.

If we are prepared to look at difficult truths, we can discern the source of our pain – that egoic kernel that tenaciously clutches onto some object or idea. For Jelaluddin Rumi, grieving the death of his teacher was a passage to finding the eternal wisdom of Shams within himself. For Ramana Maharishi, the fear of dying led to a fearless state of enlightenment. By doing this work, the ultimate death in life – the absence of self-importance – becomes attainable. Through this, any fear or aversion of physical death will inevitably recede.