DEATH IS NOT THE ENEMY BUT THE DOORWAY: The Symphony of Existence Part Two

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Summary

The great invitation is to accept death. In accepting Lao Tzu’s invitation to give up the fight against death and remain upmost in passivity, existence is revealed as sublime relaxation. Each moment becomes a surrender, one of ‘touch and let go.’ We must not hide, but rather be open to all aspects of being; in sublime relaxation, shadow issues can emerge, some even hidden by our nondual language and cliches. All is grist for death’s mill.

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Accepting the Invitation of Death

To ignore the invitation of death is to court disaster. As Lao Tzu lays out, on knowing the Eternal Law, it is seen that all things return to death:

The myriad things take shape and rise to activity,
But I watch them fall back to their repose,
Like vegetation that luxuriantly grows
But returns to the root (soil) from which it springs.

To return to the root is Repose;
It is called going back to one’s Destiny.
Going back to one’s Destiny is to find the Eternal Law,
To know the Eternal Law is Enlightenment.
And not to know the Eternal Law
Is to court disaster. (Osho, 2003, p. 1)

Here, Lao Tzu points to death as destiny, so it is not the enemy of life, for all paths lead to death. Don’t fight death; when death is accepted, not in the future but now, many aspects of life are immediately transformed.

When death is seen as the enemy, something which must be fought against, how can anybody be at ease in the moment, at home? Everything seems like survival of the fittest, a struggle, while death is just around the corner and could arise any second, so of course one lives in fear, frightened, tense, every other a potential enemy who could deliver death.

A life lived with intensity means that death is embraced, without fear, in each moment, as one can see that death is in fact the innermost core of life. Death is accepted as sublime relaxation. One accepts that she, too, is a dead person walking towards the gallows, as death belongs in the natural order of things. The body is like a fading star, and in the vastness of beyond time, it has already crashed into the ocean.

The recipe for accepting death, Lao Tzu reminds us, is to “Attain the utmost in Passivity, Hold firm to the basis of Quietude.” One simply embraces non-doing, inactivity, and rests in the Tao, the creative void. Here both body and mind are let go of, and one is just simply the vastness of existence itself. In total passivity, one disappears, and the whole world goes on in his absence. One rests in absolute transparency, and in this merging with death, he paradoxically leaves death behind. One is the vast consciousness of existence, totally sublime, relaxed, and ecstatic. The sublime relaxation accompanying the acceptance of death is truly incredible.

To accept death, we must encounter ultimate darkness. The problem, though, is that there is a gap. The zero point of negative nothingness—the vast darkness which feels like non-being, non-existence, and absence—must be experienced and embraced, for it is out of this nothingness that the brilliant light of existence reveals itself. This embrace, however, involves a quantum leap, a letting go, a willingness to go into the darkest possible experience of existence, and sit there,
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with no escape, in the vacuum of non-existence, darkness itself. The only way through this mother of all fears is to sit in the black non-existence energy; once it is sat in, the black hole of eternity reveals itself. The blackest black merges with the intense white light of existence, revealing the truly nondual nature of existence.

Death Comes Dancing

Really, what is required is total surrender. This is the final step: total surrender of body-mind. A classic Chinese Taoist tale that Osho (1977) shared exemplifies the body-mind surrender. A monk was in search of Buddha. He travelled for years and years and then finally he arrived in the land where Buddha lived. Just a river had to be crossed, and he would be face to face with Buddha. The monk was ecstatic. He enquired whether he could get a ferry or boat to go to the other shore, for the river was very wide. But the people on the shore informed him: nobody will be able to take you there because there is a legend that whosoever goes to the other shore never comes back. So nobody dares to take you. You will have to swim.

Afraid of course, because the river was very wide, but finding no other way, the monk started swimming. In the middle of the river, he saw a corpse floating, coming closer and closer toward him. He became afraid; he wanted to avoid the corpse. He tried in many ways to dodge it, but he couldn’t. The corpse proved very tricky and kept drawing nearer. Finding no way to escape it (and, moreover, curiosity also possessed him, because the corpse seemed to be the corpse of a Buddhist monk: the ochre robe, the clean-shaved head), he summoned his courage and allowed the corpse to come near; then, he found himself swimming toward the corpse.

He looked at the face and started laughing madly. It was his own corpse! He could not believe his eyes, but it was so. He looked again and again. It was his own corpse! And then, the corpse floated down the river, and the monk watched all his past go with it: all that he had learnt, all that he had possessed, all that he had been, the ego, the centre of his mind, the self—everything floated off with the corpse. He was totally empty. Now, there was no need to go to the other shore, because once his past had been taken by the river, the monk was Buddha. He started laughing: he had been searching for the Buddha without, and the Buddha was within.

Laughing, he returned to the same shore he had left minutes before, but nobody could recognize him. He even told people, I am the same man! But they laughed. He was not the same man. He was not, really. And this was the reason for the legend that nobody comes back from across the river: everybody who had gone returned, but they were changed, the old was dead, and the absolutely new had taken its place.

The monk’s is also my story, your story. Buddhahood only became available to me when I came to the wide river, where all that I had done, all that I could do, all that I had possessed, all that I could possess, all that I had been, all that I could be, all was swept by the wide river moving towards the ocean; and I was left totally alone, with no possession, with no body, with no mind. In that aloneness, Buddhahood flowered.

It is a change in occupancy. One is no longer a separate self but the vastness of existence, the radiant transcendence and interconnected energy. All form is within the vast sky of consciousness. This change of occupancy is remarkably noticeable, in its sharp contrast to the
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Zen: Touch and Let Go

On surrendering to death, I have always loved Osho’s answer to the question, “What is the essence of Zen?” He replied, “Touch and let go” (Osho, 1979). Osho is pointing to enjoyment and celebration, with no seizing and grasping, always open to this moment.

Recently, for ten days it looked like my 23 year relationship with my wife was over. It was a huge blown-wide-open heart situation, a situation that seemed like death. In no judgment, I walked, open to what existence revealed. To my shock, I saw that, for many years, I had been detached and somewhat emotionally reserved in the relationship. Now, with the relationship gone, I could see that I had not been totally heartfelt, connected, and involved moment to moment, much of the time passively withdrawn into my meditative stance. Death reveals, and in the death of the relationship, my heart opened up to reveal things I had never seen.

With my heart blown open, I could see how I had been squished in my family of origin by a superiority-and-fear-based relationship with my doctor father, and I had closed off my heart to survive. I had enjoyed the loving relationship with my wife for more than 2 decades, but there was always a part of me that had been detached and reserved in my love; it even showed up in my relationship with my step-kids. I fell to my knees. I could now see the implications of my passive detachment and had to take responsibility for its impact on my family. I saw it so clearly, and it brought me to tears.

In many ways, the separation has been a glaring wake up call for me. The chance to mirror back intense love is now. In the poignancy of the moment, love and death co-exist, like in these lines from Rilke:

I am the pause between two notes
That fall into a real accordance scarce at all
For death’s note tends to dominate.
Both though are reconciled
In the dark interval tremblingly
And the song remains immaculate. (Osho, 1978, p. 220)

I am on the 5th floor of a bachelor suite; the sun rises. As I prepare for my morning run, all of the coulees open up in transcendent glory, breath taking, sublime.

I am e-mailing my stepdaughter for a phone call. Here I am reaching out by e-mail, fumbling away. Love is in the air, as well as trembling uncertainty. It is all so fragile, sacred, poignant, and ecstatic. We talk on the phone, and I apologize for my emotional detachment and closed-offness over the years. She gives me feedback about hiding behind nondual clichés and not being totally emotionally vulnerable and sharing my love in a way that can be felt, even with her. Ouch, beautiful, cuts like a knife.
Easy is Right

All of this reminds me of Lao Tzu’s disciple Chuang Tzu. Chuang Tzu said that this vast existence truly is a cosmic dance of abundant joy: clouds glide in the skies, rivers flow, seeds become flowers, birds are on the wing. Just today on my early morning run, I bump into a reclusive animal, a wolverine, brown and yellow, looking like a little bear. With this abundance already here, the invitation is to enjoy this existence. As Chuang Tzu, a Taoist master in his own right, pointed to, all that is required is just an effortless natural spontaneous embrace, in which easy is right. No effort is necessary; the naturalness of existence is already here to be enjoyed:

So, when the shoe fits, the foot is forgotten,
When the belt fits, the belly is forgotten,
When the heart is right, ‘for’ and ‘against’ are forgotten.

No drives, no compulsions, no needs, no attractions:
Then your affairs are under control.
You are a free [being].

Easy is right. Begin right and you are easy.
Continue easy and you are right.
The right way to go easy is to forget the right way
And forget that the going is easy. (Osho, 1976, p.2)

It would seem, for many, that one of the hardest things in life is to just take it easy. In my experience, when the death of the separate self has happened and one has surrendered to existence, it is clearly realized that there is nowhere to go, nothing to do, and nothing to know: the mystery of existence can be embraced right now. The death of the seeker leaves a being relaxed and sauntering along in existence. One embraces taking it easy.

There is an ecstatic natural overflowing ecstasy in taking it easy and embracing nature. I have always known this from my daily one-hour runs in nature. The hour runs are always effortless, the body so enjoys running, and I am swept away by the vast connectedness, the beauty, and the ordinariness.

The shadow side of this intense embracement of existence is to look at all aspects of being. As my step-daughter pointed out to me so authentically, I had been emotionally hiding in nondual land with my nondual clichés. The invitation is clear; we must be open to all dimensions—body, mind, heart, guts, soul, and spirit—in embracing the nondual intensity and vastness of existence. As Lao Tzu reminded us, death embraced is both the great revealing key and the portal to this process.
References


