

Death is a Warning to Live Life Deeply and Well

Those of you who are in your 50's and 60's have told me that you have increasingly become involved in attending, planning, and participating in funerals of friends and loved ones. Sometimes we even complain that it seems to be all we do these days.

Others conclude therefore that you might as well enjoy yourself and not dwell on the negatives of life. The latter is the case with most Americans – a profoundly dissatisfied and unhappy people. We simply cannot get enough of what makes us even more dissatisfied. If we include the Japanese, we together, consume and discard more than all the countries of the world combined. We are the ecologically imbalanced basket case of the world and can yet find the arrogance to tell others how they are polluting the world. Things and their possession are seen as making us happy - and this greed for things, power, and control are seen to be what the real world is all about. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth.

In Buddhist parlance, Death is this seemingly ferocious and frightening personality called Yama, who is, in fact, our great friend. Yama shows us the delusory nature of our normal existence, how they are fundamentally self-centered and based on the Three Poisons of Anger, Greed and Ignorance or Stupidity. Normally, we seek to fight and resist Death to the very end – and even then to deny that it has occurred. This is the inherited stance of western civilization. As Buddhists, we normally see Yama as frightening; but as we encounter Death in our normal, everyday lives, Yama becomes a familiar presence – and finally a friend who moves us from the normal to the natural. And it is in the natural world that we begin to live life deeply and well; not wasting (mot-

tainai), experiencing joy and gratitude for the first time (arigatai), and accepting the contradictions in my life and thus in the life of others (shikata-ganai). The Nembutsu is the balance of this normalness and natural-ness. Namo is the normal me; kind/mean-spirited, generous/stingy, evil/good, angry/calm, moral/immoral, ethical/unethical, etc., etc. Amidabutsu is the natural me; the true, the good, the beautiful, the connected reality. Namo and Amidabutsu, I and Amidabuddha are as opposite as one can get, yet, at the same time, I and Amidabuddha are one. It is not that we go from Namo to Amidabutsu, Namoamidabutsu is the expression of the true and real relationship – infinitely separate and, at the same time, infinitely the same.

Yama/Death, in the process from frightening ogre to benevolent friend, makes us see and appreciate in a new way, resetting our priorities, and making us able to see everyday things in a new light - brighter, clearer, and more beautiful. In Kona, Hawaii, we met a Dharma friend whose father, she said, was constantly saying Namoamidabutsu; whether unhappy or happy, whether in front of the butsudana or in the toilet – Namoamidabutsu – a man who befriended Yama.

Gassho,

Rev. Mas