



The SIMS Death and Dying Support Project

Tracy Bell

If we look carefully and honestly at what happens when someone is dying and how we respond, we can see our tendency to *dislike* the dying process, to think of it as unfortunate if not tragic. We often turn away from it unknowingly. It's hard for us to watch, for so many reasons of our humanness. We don't want the dying person to suffer; we want it over quickly. We don't understand the many facets of pain, and we resist. We don't want to be reminded of our own impending death. We unconsciously miss the point of seeing dying for what it is: a process as natural as birth, the ultimate of life's transitions, undeniably worthy of our time and attention. We hesitate to stop the flow of our lives to spend time with death.

What results from our inadvertent denial of death is that we're anywhere from slightly to hugely uncomfortable around people who are dying—we don't know what to say or how to relate. We do what we must do, but we often don't know how to “hang out” or be truly present and patient with someone who is dying, to accept what's happening and relax with it as it unfolds naturally, much less have any confidence in our ability to be of value in practical or spiritual ways.

It is for these reasons that the SIMS Death and Dying Support Project was formed in recent years. We recognized both the need and the opportunity to accompany members of our sangha who are dying, in a way that defies our cultural denial of death and aligns with our dharma practice together.

The group gathers every few months for a half day of education, reflection, and discussion in order to make ourselves continually more aware and prepared—to offer our companionship to fellow sangha members in their time of nearing death, and also to be more conscious and accepting of the fact of our own deaths.

In doing so, we become familiar with a consciousness that is useful when someone is dying—for us, for the person dying, and for those involved in caregiving, visiting, and helping out. As we get more comfortable, we practice with the concepts of attending to death with no fear, no sympathy, and no sense of separation. We ask ourselves how we might want others to sit with us and relate to us during our own dying experience.

We grow our understanding that, whether dying happens quickly or takes longer, it deserves our conscious engagement. The alternative to anxiety and avoidance is showing up with the same qualities that we bring to our meditation: mindful interest, non-judgmental allowance of our unfolding experience, and compassion for the commonality of suffering between ourselves and others. We open to

all of the pleasant, unpleasant, unknowable and mysterious things that come about when a human being is getting ready to die.

What happens is transformative. We gather together with our collective uneasiness, determination and wonder. We loosen our fear; we witness a profound event. We let it in to our experience. We grow together, and we prepare for death.

Any SIMS member with an interest in investigating this awareness can participate. To get involved, see the project listed under “Volunteer Opportunities” on the SIMS website.