



## WHY THE SIMS DEATH AND DYING SUPPORT PROJECT WORKS

Tracy Bell

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Since 2008, the SIMS Death and Dying Support Project has offered a forum for sangha members interested in learning, sharing, and investigating the topic of death and dying in the context of our dharma practice together.

The Project is listed under “Volunteer Opportunities” on our website although it is somewhat of an anomaly – not purely a Kalyana Mitta (KM) or Shared Interest Group, but not purely a Volunteer Opportunity either. It truly is a project, with a variety of objectives.

Our primary objective is to offer support to SIMS sangha members who are terminally ill, nearing death, or actively dying – and we do this. But this agenda in itself presents an entry point to the greater underlying dilemma that has become the main focus of our group: we are culturally uncomfortable with death; we are conditioned to turn away. We don’t know how to show up with people who are dying, and we avoid thinking about our own. And for many, as life, practice and learning come about, there is a growing sense that our aversion is costing us something. We are some mixture of curious and miserable about our discomfort and avoidance.

So the original Death and Dying Support Project invited sangha members who wanted an open forum for talking and learning about death and dying and for getting more comfortable with being around it.

It turns out there are a quite a number of us interested in coming together on this topic for one reason and another. Some are aware that they have missed precious opportunities to be present and useful with those in their lives who were dying. Some want a way to process the fear, aversion and perhaps wonder they hold toward their own (sometime in the future) dying process. Many want to bring a pin-pointed awareness to their dharma practice by allowing the reality of death more into their view in a supportive, palatable way. Our combined reasons for continuing to meet have become shared and common to all of us – many participants who attend regularly, and many who come and go as they are able.

What makes the Death and Dying Support Project work is the co-creation of a safe, respectful space for exploring ourselves and the subject matter. We meet about three or four times a year, usually at the SIMS Dharma Center. We sit together in a large circle and slow ourselves down to speak mindfully and listen deeply to each other. We always have a specific topic, and a guest speaker (or sometimes one of us) facilitates the theme. Over time and a variety of explorations, we accumulate an understanding and greater comfort level with death and dying in both practical and spiritual ways. We become educated, supported, and strengthened by our common willingness to explore the difficult landscape of our mortality and all of its associated unknowns.

In doing so, we feel somehow capable of not only being available to each other, but to our family members, loved ones, and other sangha members who are nearing their death. We have formed small groups of 4 to 5 around terminally ill sangha members who have asked us to be with them. This small nucleus group offers to meet regularly in the person's home for meditation and supportive presence. This often grows into other kinds of support and one on one interactions. We have provided meals and hospital bedside companionship. We go for walks and outings, drive people to appointments. Talk, and not talk. Read. Sit. Become friends.

Sangha members interested in receiving support from our group should contact myself, a SIMS Guiding Teacher or a Board member. Members interested in participating in the project and its meetings should contact me using the email link in our section of the "Volunteer Opportunities" page on the SIMS website.

The SIMS Death and Dying Support Project closes each meeting with the Zen Night Chant:

*May I respectfully remind you  
Life and death are of supreme importance  
Time passes swiftly and opportunities are lost.  
Let us awaken, awaken...  
Do not squander your life.*