



Understanding Aging and Death – Part II*

By Rodney Smith

This is the second of a two-part article about the transforming power death has if we first become aware of how the subject works on us, the fear and denial it can instill, and the stages we go through in our deepening relationship with it. Part I of this article addressed the stages of first yearning self-preservation and then opening to death's universality. This part continues the journey through a personal understanding based on investigation to living within death, as life itself.

The Stage of Personal Inquiry

Physical death always happens to a sentient being, and when death arrives some aliveness inside the shell of form appears to end. The fear of death is the fear that this aliveness will be completely extinguished, and that what was once is no more. The question we started with—what is death; what is this extinguishment?—now changes to what or who is going to be extinguished? These questions are two sides of the same coin. It is not that the first question has been resolved; it is just that the first question cannot be fully understood until we investigated the “who” that is going to die. We cannot know what death is independent of the person who is dying.

Though this sounds a little like a Dr. Seuss story, it actually becomes a very poignant and focused inquiry, and emerges out of our inherent curiosity of death. Once we have confronted the fear that is conjoined with death, the fear is transformed into inquisitiveness. The terror of annihilation held us back from a full frontal exploration of death, but now that interest has arisen once more, and the question of who is it that is dying becomes the obvious next chapter to explore.

If we know how the sense of being someone forms within our minds, we can better understand what death does to that identity. How does death affect the person's sense-of-self, and is there a person without his stated sense of identity? Death will show us all of this in detail as it slowly dissolves what the person is formed around. We will then apprehend both what a person is and the nature of death itself by understanding this dissolution.

We start this investigation by trying to find something in us that does not die, something that is impervious to death. If we can discover that which is invulnerable to dying then we have a vantage point from which to see how death operates and to understand what death is. We start the search at a very personal level with the question, “Is there anything in me that does not change?” We know that the answer cannot reside in anything that moves, since all movement is either on its way in or on its way out. All the incoming sense data from all the sense doors are in constant transition, and the emotions, thoughts, memories, and commentary inside the head also seem to be constantly in a state of flux, so I can cast those as extraneous to the search at hand. What is left after all this has been discarded?

We may still feel like there is something or someone way back inside receiving everything that is coming into the mind. What is that? If we are going to answer this inquiry, we are called to greater stillness. Think

of stillness, where nothing is in movement, as death. We are called upon in serious inquiry to meet all mental movement with the absolute quiet of listening; thus we are already approaching death even as we investigate it. Everything moves within stillness, but stillness itself does not move. Stillness is a little like the space in a room: the space holds the entire content in the room, but the space itself is motionless. In this inquiry, we are looking for the one thing that does not move, the one thing that is still and completely at rest.

We are now deeply involved in the question of what holds all movement but itself does not move. Wherever we locate ourselves as a position hearing the noise, that placeholder has thought at its center and is not still. But something else is present that hears the noise of the thought. That something else is awareness, or formless presence. Awareness cannot die because it is absolutely still and is therefore synonymous to death. Awareness is the end of our inquiry since we can go no further than stillness. In one sudden sweep of revelation, we realize the nature of death is the nature of ourselves, that we are death. How then can we die when death is intrinsic to our nature?

I worked with a woman in hospice care that was alert but very close to death. She had been under our care for several months, and during that time we grew to have a close relationship. Early on, she was inquisitive and wanted to know about my Buddhist background, which I gladly shared with her. We did a little spiritual investigation together, but she would always end it when the subject turned to her dying.

I sensed an opening and a willingness in this patient to explore more deeply as her death approached. At this point she was unable to respond, but everything was clear through her eyes as we investigated what would die. I asked her if her brain would continue, and she shook her head. I asked if her body would survive death, and again she indicated it would not. I then said, "Let us see if we can find something that will live through this process." I asked, "What about the source of life itself? Let us be quiet and see if we can find it. Look for that which cannot die." After pondering for a few minutes, her eyes were alight and I knew that she touched something that would sustain her throughout her dying. She died peacefully a few days later.

What makes death so fearful is the mental latticework we build around awareness to make it seem as if there is something that could be taken away. We tie awareness to our self-definitions, personality traits, and character flaws—all of which cease to exist with the death of the body. We attempt to bring along some small facet of ourselves through the dying process, but we intuitively know there is a deeper and richer part of us that does not need protection and will come along on its own. The part that cannot die does not offer us an identity, so we make the choice to try to keep our identity alive rather than to abide in the deathless without one. Once we have chosen to identify with any part of us that will die, we have made death a problem. It is helpful to remember that there is an ongoing choice of whether to go with our identity or with the deathless. If we chose our identity, death will always threaten that choice.

Remember that the Buddha left home to resolve the suffering of death, and his spiritual awakening was the discovery of how each of us creates the conditions for the existence of death. Death has now shown us its resolution by revealing that everything that we can identify as self will die, but stillness is the end of death—the death of death—and cannot die. The formless and deathless stillness hold all formations. Here, then, is the end of suffering.

Exercise: Settle yourself into a quiet position and ask what cannot die. When you ask that question, usually what floods the consciousness is everything that can and will die. You may start thinking and emoting about the question; you may get nervous and become restless; or you may become fearful of this line of inquiry. Let everything that can die, including your entire

consciousness, start to settle, and then ask the question again. If everything of form dies, what is left? What holds form? What is the seat of aliveness itself? If everything that moves must die, what does not move and therefore cannot die?

The Stage of Living Death

There is one more stage that we pass through on our way to the deathless gate: the stage that allows us to live death, which is the same as living an authentic life. Living death does not mean we walk around like a zombie disconnected from life, but rather that we are releasing life to be renewed moment after moment. Death, then, is the willingness to relinquish life and let it be. This is the stage of surrender, which is not separate from embodied action and a full response to life.

I have noticed over the years that many meditators are skilled at allowing life to affect them. They let life in and allow themselves to be touched with increased sensitivity and warmth. What seems more difficult is to let life out, to release it once it has touched us. It almost seems disrespectful to let something go without mentally prolonging the event or pondering over the implications of the experience. It feels as if we have betrayed the experience by letting it go too quickly. We fear we were not really affected by it unless we keep recirculating its memory to show what it meant to us. A good case in point is our need to worry. Many of us feel we have to prolong our caring into worry to demonstrate our love. We couple love with worry as if worry proves our love. If we do not worry about the person, do we really care about them?

When I was a hospice caregiver I would see three or four patients a day, driving to each of their homes. I would respond to the dramatic scene in each house with all the care and concern the situation required. As I would drive from one home to the next, I would intentionally use the time of travel to release the story of the last visit. By surrendering the story of the last home, I found I would respond appropriately to the immediate situation. This kept me from romanticizing or idealizing any visit, which allowed me to pace my way through the week, month, and years of service.

Love needs to be refreshed moment after moment, and protracted thinking inhibits its renewal. All the heart qualities, like caring and kindness, are immediate expressions of the heart and are accessible here and now as long as the mind is not obstructing the heart with its rhetoric. From the person's point of view, it appears as if the heart is there one moment and gone the next, having its own timing and duration, but we are in fact turning away from the heart by romanticizing what just occurred. In order to come back to ever-present love, we have to die to the thought of love. Love lives within the death of form; it lives within the stillness that surrounds the words and not within the words themselves.

Exercise: Inquire whether love lives within death. Notice whether love renews itself in your thoughts or in stillness. Where is its natural home, and from what does it spring forth? Can you prolong love through your narrative? Does love arise within the moment or is it a product of the past and future? Live love and see for yourself what confines it and what sets it free.

What does death look like when we live within it? It looks like surrender. Instead of feeding on the backlog of our emotional reactions, we just drop them; in place of elaboration, we are quiet; instead of projection out our discomforts, we own them; and instead of surmounting the problem, we drop the resistance that created the problem in the first place. We choose stillness over noise, non-doing over ambition, openness over contraction, and wonder over certainty. We live within death by surrendering our need to be separate.

When we surrender we are allowing the moment to die and be refreshed. We are not surrendering to someone or something; we are releasing the narrative that divides life into discrete sections and separates

the experience from the experiencer. We relinquish the conceptual covering that has kept life frozen within the realm of our thinking and surrender into quiet, into the still death of the moment, into the full and total living of life. Full aliveness requires death since death regenerates life. Anything we carry over from one moment to the next obstructs the natural radiance of the present. Life and death live side-by-side in a never-ending rejuvenation as one and the same thing. This is the spiritual journey, and this is the journey of death.

We have to be sure that we surrender completely, or else surrender can be disguised as escapism. True surrender is not something we decide to do; it is an effortless act of wisdom, which will only release something when that something is completely understood. For example if we are aversive to anger, we may think we are surrendering the need to be angry when actually we may be simply avoiding the feeling of anger. Often the anger is a symptom of a greater disturbance, such as vulnerability, self-negation, or dismissal, that may evoke deep feelings of self-dislike. If we try to surrender our emotions before we thoroughly understand where the pain resides, we will end up reinforcing their recurrence in the future.

Death as an Advisor

Nothing has ever been alive in the way we thought it was. Through the avoidance of death we created individual life, and individual life as we have believed it to be simply does not exist. There is no separate life out there, no me in here, and no individual thing anywhere to be found. When we section any part of life off from itself as a separate thing, we condemn it to birth, aging, and death.

If we choose to live within the pleasure/pain principle, seeking this object and avoiding that, we create all opposites, including the polarity of life and death. One object is always defined, compared, and evaluated in contrast to another, and death enters as an opposition when we lean toward being alive. By forcing the world into a configuration of isolated and divided things, we created the possibility of mentally pursuing and avoiding reality but lose the ease and contentment of abiding within the unified mind. We give up everlasting life for a limited experience that is stalked by death.

Once we side toward life and away from death, we have made something out of death, and it springs to life. Now death takes on its own reality, its own force and mandate. It now tracks us down because we package ourselves within its reach. As we seek greater definition for ourselves, the objects within our perceptions also become more defined, and once individual things are created through our definitions the laws of impermanence start to have an effect.

Death can only affect the world of separate objects. It has no power or definition within the whole. Said slightly differently, death only has power over form, not the formless. If we want form—if we define ourselves as separate—death will greet us. If we let form die and do not think ourselves into creation—if we allow ourselves to open beyond our impoverished identity—then death cannot find us. The passageway from death to the deathless is the willingness to surrender our separation. We have to die to ourselves, to who we think we are, in order to abide in the deathless.

The Buddha's decree was simply this: "Death does not exist." He proclaimed the deathless, which is not a different life but life lived from a different vantage point. He suggested awakening to death as an advisor and allowing it to show us our miscalculations, misplaced identity, and misunderstood truths. We are asked to use death as its own foundation, referencing everything back through it. Death holds the suffering, and it contains the liberation.

The body, when referenced, holds the key to deciphering our way out of form. We begin the journey into the body with the knowledge of its aging and eventual death, but as we bear witness to what the body is in

and of itself, the limitations start to loosen. The body begins to be seen both as a limitation, held within the laws of impermanence and death, and as a liberating tool that, when properly understood, moves us beyond those very imperfections.

**Excerpted from Rodney's forthcoming book on navigating the Four Foundations*