
KANJI:

A Good Death, a Bad Death

*How do we live according to the teachings of the Buddha?
Get born and die every day.*

KOAN

Kanji's father lay dying in a hospital room, feeble yet still alert. Kanji hoped to give him the final gift of a good death. The two embraced, kissed, and said they loved each other. Kanji said to himself, *This is a good death.*

The next day, after his father became unconscious, gasping for breath, other members of the family sat near the bed chatting about news and trivia, laughing and sharing irrelevant stories. Kanji told himself, *This is a bad death.*

That night everyone left the room except Kanji and his exhausted mother, who slept in a chair near the bed. All night Kanji stayed awake, holding his father's hand and whispering comforting words in his ear. Kanji thought, *This is a good death.*

The next day his father was comatose. Kanji stood near the hospital bed, listening to other family members talking. Suddenly his father shouted—a groan of agony, face clenched in pain, body arched and rigid in intense suffering. Then he lay still. The heart monitor plunged to zero.

Kanji experienced an opening.

REFLECTION

Sometimes people think that spirituality smoothens things out, makes good and bad equally tolerable, maybe even nice. Or else it takes us beyond into some holy, transcendent space. We hide behind concepts such as oneness, emptiness, and enlightenment; we talk about the spirit world.

Doesn't this stand out most strikingly at a time of death? Death scares us worse than anything. That's when we use words and phrases like: *she left her body, he has gone to the other shore, she has left this realm of existence, he is now in heaven, she has gone to God.* Most of the time the work of disposing of the corpse is done by surrogates: undertakers to handle the body, chemicals to hide the disintegration and cover up the smell, crematoria operators to burn the body or gravediggers to bury it.

In a Zen Buddhist memorial service, we invoke the *vast ocean of dazzling light* and *tranquil passages of great calm*, but doesn't the actual experience feel very different? There's the smell of illness and medications, urine, and disinfectant. There's groaning and struggling, or a morphine-induced haze fading into unconsciousness or coma.

Is there any way to make death neat or clean? Can we predict how and when death will come, whether in a car accident, a

sudden heart attack, a lingering illness, violence, or old age? If anything, death is a showcase for how vulnerable we are, how we hang on to life by only the thinnest of threads, how inexorable and inevitable the end of our life really is. No one, not the most loving son or daughter, not the best physician in the world, can save us from it.

As more and more volunteers have gotten involved in hospice and the care of the dying, we hear of deathbed scenes full of peace and love, with no anguish, pain, regrets, or struggle, and we think: *That's what I want for myself, for my loved ones, for my friends. I want a good death.* We make preparations, write Living Wills and designate Health Care Proxies. We think about how we'd like to die—what prayers or book passages should be recited, what music should be played—and have clear discussions about this with our families and loved ones.

But in the end the heart monitor will plunge to zero. The relationships that have depended on this heart will end, as will the thinking and planning that have depended on our brain. Since we don't know how this will happen, the preparations we made may be effective or not. We may have wanted all our family members to be with us, but our death happens so fast that only First Responders are there. We may have decided not to take extraordinary measures to prolong our life, not to eat or drink, and in the end change our mind.

I can't control the terms of my death, but what about how I meet it? Can I even label it as *good* or *bad*?

A friend of mine, a psychiatrist and longtime Zen practitioner, lay in hospice in his ninety-first year and grumbled: *Why is it taking me so long to die?*

Death is simple—and sacred—beyond words.

A new journey begins and ends in a flash, followed by another journey, and another one after that because each moment you die and are reborn. We judge this moment good, that one bad, another indifferent. Isn't that like saying that this life is good, another is better, the one after that not so good? Change is perpetual, but so is connection. We breathe in air and breathe it out again, and the air we breathe out others in the room breathe in while we breathe in the air they just expelled from their lungs. So much connects us all the time.

No matter what or how much I murmur to my dying father, the basic connection was made long ago. The elements of his life are intertwined with mine and mine with his. Doors are opening and closing all the time; change and connection are an inextricable part of every moment.

"Buddha's relics are body and mind," we chant at a memorial service. Is anything truly gone?

I will hold his hand, give him a drink of water, and apply a cool, wet towel to his hot face. The memorial chant says: "Vast ocean of dazzling light, marked by the waves of life and death; the tranquil passage of great calm embodies the form of new and old, coming and going. We devoutly aspire to true compassion."

Tell me, what is true compassion?

Think of when you were at the bedside of someone who died. Was it a good or a bad death? In whose judgment? What made it one or the other?