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Imitating Death in the Quest for Enlightenment

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by Ronald Epstein, Ph.D.

I.

The bare bones of the story of Bodhidharma, that strange, bearded, wide-eyed fellow who brought the meditation school of Buddhism that we know as Zen to China, are well known. He sailed from India to Canton and then proceeded to the court of Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty, who asked the Patriarch how much merit he had accumulated from sponsoring the building of temples, the copying of Buddhist scriptures, and the ordination of monks. When Bodhidharma replied, "None," the emperor didn't understand, so Bodhidharma went north, crossed the Yangtse River on a reed, and spent nine years gazing at a wall at Shao-lin Monastery.

At the conclusion of those nine years, the tradition relates, a Chinese monk named Shen-kuang (Hui-k'o) became the second Patriarch in China. Yet he was not the first there to recognize the Patriarch's mind. The first was not a person at all; he was a parrot.

After Bodhidharma left Emperor Wu,

> "(he) went to Nanking where he listened to Dharma Master Shen Kuang explain the Sutras. When Shen Kuang spoke, the heavens rained fragrant blossoms and a golden-petalled lotus rose from the earth for him to sit upon...
>
> After listening to the Sutra, Bodhidharma asked, "Dharma Master, what are you doing?"
>
> "I am explaining Sutras," Shen Kuang replied.
>
> "Why are you explaining Sutras?"
>
> "I am teaching people to end birth and death."
>
> "Oh?" said Bodhidharma, "Exactly how do you do that? In this Sutra which you explain, the words are black and the paper is white. How does this teach people to end birth and death?"
>
> Dharma Master Shen Kuang had nothing to say. How did he teach people to end birth and death? He fumed in silence. Then, even though heavenly maidens rained down flowers and the earth gave forth golden lotuses, Dharma Master Shen Kuang got angry...and used his heavy iron beads to level the opposition. In response to Bodhidharma's question, he flushed with anger and raged like a tidal wave smashing a mountain. As he whipped out his beads, he snapped, "You are slandering the Dharma!" and cracked Bodhidharma across the mouth, knocking loose two teeth. Bodhidharma neither moved nor spoke. He hadn't expected such a vicious reply...Bodhidharma did not let his teeth fall to the ground. Instead he swallowed them and disappeared down the road. Although he had been battered and reviled,...those who leave left the home life

have to be patient. How much more so must a patriarch forbear.

Bodhidharma then met a parrot imprisoned in a wicker cage. This bird was much more intelligent than Dharma Master Shen Kuang. Recognizing Bodhidharma as the First Patriarch, the bird said,

Mind from the West,
Mind from the West,
Teach me a way
To escape from this cage.

Although Bodhidharma had received no response from people, this parrot recognized him. Hearing the bird's plea for help, Bodhidharma whispered a secret expedient teaching to teach this bird how to end suffering. He said,

To escape from the cage;
To escape from the cage,
Jut out both legs,
Close both eyes.
This is the way
To escape from the cage!

The parrot listened carefully and said, "All right! I understand," and stuck out his legs, closed his eyes, and waited.

When the bird's owner came home from work, he always played with his parrot. But this time when he looked in the cage he was shocked... (and) was on the verge of tears. He couldn't have been more upset if his own son had died. He pulled open the cage door and scooped up the bird, which lay still and quiet in his hand. The body had not yet chilled. The owner looked with disbelief at the little body. He peeked at it from the left and right; it didn't even quiver. Slowly, he opened his hand...PHLLRTTPHRTTPHLLRTT!! The bird broke loose from his hand and flew away!
(Hua, *The Sixth Patriarch's Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra and Commentary*, San Francisco: Sino-American Buddhist Assoc., 1971, pp. 2-4)

That is the story of how the parrot gained its freedom.

Soon after Bodhidharma left Shen-kuang, however, Yama, King of the Dead, sent the ghost of impermanence with a summons for Shen-kuang, who was quite surprised that he too must die. Shen-kuang then asked whether indeed there really was anyone in China who was not subject to Yama's summons. The reply came back: only the Indian monk whose teeth Shen-kuang had knocked out. Shen-kuang then asked for a temporary reprieve from Yama so that he could chase after Bodhidharma and learn how to escape death.

The path to the ending of birth and death is the enlightenment Bodhidharma taught. According to one tradition, which will be explained more fully below, Bodhidharma was so intransigent with Emperor Wu because he wanted to save him from the cruel and untimely death which was impending as a result of the

karma which the emperor had created in a former life. Bodhidharma failed. Shen-kuang followed Bodhidharma only after learning that he was the only one who could teach him how to escape death. However, in yet another story, Bodhidharma finally got so tired of being poisoned by jealous monks all the time--none of the attempts were successful--that he voluntarily lay down and died. Yet, after his burial, an official in a distant province saw him hurrying off to India holding a single shoe in his hand. When the Patriarch's grave was subsequently opened, with the exception of the other shoe, the coffin was empty.

What prescriptions did Bodhidharma give for enlightenment (that is, for permanently transcending the life-death cycle), or in more mythological terms, for permanently avoiding the summons of King Yama? For the emperor, what Bodhidharma had in mind was getting him to let go of all his merit, to see through his attachments to being emperor, to being a great patron of the Buddhadharma, and instead to leave the home life and devote his full time to making an end of his own personal cycle of death and rebirth.

Shen-kuang had already left the home life, yet he too was caught up in the enjoyment of the great merit which he had accumulated. Bodhidharma's formula for him involved a huge lesson in humility: kneeling before Bodhidharma for nine years as the Patriarch sat staring at the wall, totally ignoring him. It was only when Shen-kuang demonstrated, by cutting off his arm, that the Dharma was even more important to him than his body, that Bodhidharma consented to teach him. Then, when Shen-kuang complained of the pain and asked Bodhidharma to quiet his mind, Shen-kuang finally realized his independence from both his physical bodily existence and his mental continuum and received the Mind Seal.

Yet it was to the parrot that Bodhidharma gave the most specific instruction on how to become free from this physical, bodily existence and its accompanying mortality, and through this, how we ourselves can free ourselves from our own cages. When he tells the parrot to lie down, close its eyes, and play dead, he is perhaps telling human candidates for enlightenment to sit down in meditation and play dead, to ignore the pleasure and pain of the body, and to become living dead people. For only in imitating death, Bodhidharma counsels, will we gain our freedom from physical mortality.

II.

In order to comprehend how physical mortality is understood within the Buddhist tradition, we should probably first turn our attention to the nature of life. The Buddhists tell us that life has three essential characteristics: the presence of the life-faculty, of heat, and of consciousnesses. In terms of the eight consciousnesses of Yogacara Buddhism, the life-faculty is not really separate from the basic or storehouse consciousness, and heat is a characteristic of the body when that consciousness is present. Yet the presence of the life-faculty and heat alone give the impression of living death, for there is no animation, no perceptual functioning, and no sense of an ego-individual.

Those other qualities, which we normally associate with a living being, come from the third characteristic, consciousness. The Yogacara system describes this as the first seven consciousnesses, all of which develop out of the eighth or storehouse consciousness. The seventh consciousness contains the sense of self or of ego-individuality with which it defiles the first six consciousnesses. The sixth consciousness is a perceptual and cognitive processing center, while the first five consciousnesses are the perceptual awarenesses of eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body.

Although with the emanation of these consciousnesses there is a division into "departments", they are all based upon mental discrimination. The eight consciousnesses are still basically one. To use an analogy, let us think of a room with seven light bulbs. You flick the light switch and seven distinct lights shine. Turn the switch to "off" and the lights disappear. Yet there is just one electric current, and its source is comparable to the storehouse

consciousness, or, more fundamentally, the enlightened mind.

Death is like the severing of wires or a break in the switch so that the lights go out. Yet the electricity is unharmed. The generator is still generating and the electricity flows wherever the circuit is not broken. In other words, at death the first seven consciousnesses collapse back into the eighth or storehouse consciousness, and the subsequent unitary, conglomerate consciousness leaves the body to go in search of another body and gets reborn elsewhere. It finds a new set of seven fully wired light bulbs waiting for the electricity to be turned on and the switch flicked.

Death usually occurs from exhaustion of the life force or because of a breakdown in the physical system of the body. The desires and attachments of the central consciousness which cause it to be reborn in the first place, and then to departmentalize into seven active consciousnesses that deal with the external world, have not disappeared; they have merely been frustrated temporarily. And the Buddhists tell us that it is the strongest of those desires, the sexual, that leads to rebirth.

When the Sage dies, since for him those desires and attachments no longer exist, there is no striving for rebirth. And since those desires and attachments no longer exist, death can take place at will because there is no longer any attachment to the body.

Any breaking of the attachments to the body must begin by breaking the attachment to the commonly held belief that the body is me, that I am my body. For that attachment to be broken effectively, it is necessary to come into contact with a non-physical, non-perceptual/cognitive level of consciousness. In terms of the Yogacara schema, that means either the eighth or storehouse consciousness or its real basis, the enlightened mind. Bodhidharma's technique, that of the living dead man, does not refer to the collapse of consciousnesses into the storehouse consciousness and its subsequent leave-taking of the body, for that would result in a dead dead man and not a living one. Rather, the first step is the loss of interest in that life which is associated with the gratifying of desires through the discrimination of the senses and of the intellect (that is, of the first seven consciousnesses). When one ceases to obey the perceptual and cognitive habits that are the real vehicles of desire-gratification, then the basis for ordinary perceptual and cognitive activity is destroyed and one enters samadhi. In other words, mental functioning is totally stilled, yet awareness remains in a clear and heightened condition. With the distraction of ordinary perceptual and cognitive activity removed, then the deeper layers of consciousness, which are not dependent on the body, can be apprehended. The venerable Ch'an Master Hsu Yun summed it up this way:

> One should lay down everything with which one's body is burdened, thus becoming exactly like a dead man [italics added]. The outcome will be that sense-organs, sense-data, and consciousness will vanish and that greed, anger, stupidity and love will be eliminated….When all concurrent causes heave been laid down, false thinking will vanish with the non-arising of a single thought, the brightness of one's own nature will appear in full (Luk, trans., *Ch'an and Zen Teachings*, Series One, p. 20).

In the words of the story of Bodhidharma and the parrot, the parrot is consciousness, the cage is the body, and perhaps the owner represents the beckonings of the external world that we learn to imitate and identify with as the ego. By playing dead, that is, by remaining completely indifferent to our situation and to the demands of our bodies, we are freed from the bonds of coarse physical existence and become free to come and to go as we wish. Thus the Bodhisattva Patriarch Bodhidharma, though free to go, chose to remain for a certain period.

III.

At this point one may object that it is all very well to prescribe as a method of spiritual practice an imitation of death by which one becomes completely indifferent to one's situation and to the demands of one's body, yet

that type of prescription, in itself, does little to inform us about why it is so unappealing to us and about why it is so difficult to put into practice. In order to get more of an intellectual handle on what is actually involved, let us now consider two diametrically opposed ways in which death can be conceived in a non-ordinary way. They are death as the death of change (that is, the escape from impermanence) and death as the death of self.

The death of change, the Buddhists would say, is impossible to achieve, and in seeking for it is where non-Buddhist religious systems go astray. Their search is for the permanent, the real, the unchanging; they wish to die to this world of flux to be reborn in the eternal. This cannot be, the Buddhists say, and so the quest for this type of death is negatively assessed by them. It may even be possible to claim that Buddhists see it as the basic factor which keeps us from enlightenment. In that we seek security in sameness and in repetition, we try to escape new and difficult situations and to construct and put ourselves in situations in which the stress of the new and difficult can be avoided. We fear change because we become attached to externals and identify withthem. When those externals change, anxiety is produced. Situations are difficult and stressful basically because they are abrasive to our view of ourselves, and often require that that view be modified. The threats are also internal, coming from the emergence into consciousness of repressed or other previously unconsciousness material. The constantly changing web of relationships in the external environment triggers the rise of thoughts like: "I am afraid of what people will think of me; I am afraid of what will happen to me; I am afraid that my picture of myself will no longer be tenable." We cling to and identify with the body because it seems so permanent and changes so slowly compared with our thoughts, Yet all these attempts to eliminate change spring from the attempt to establish and protect the image of a more or less permanent self.

Ironically, an extreme example of this type of self-protection is often found in that type of monastic withdrawal from the world which is an attempt to allay threats to the self by withdrawal from changing outer situations. Such external withdrawal can be paralleled internally by suppression. That is, heightened or deadened states of consciousness can be produced by temporary suppression of mental material. Such suppression was not thought to lead to the type of samadhi which would be conducive to the Path. Therefore, the Sixth Ch'an Patriarch Hui-neng commented:

> If you merely do not think of the hundred things and completely rid yourself of thought, as the last thought ceases you die and undergo rebirth in another place. (*Platform Sutra*, op. cit., p, 195).

The danger of these sorts of practices is well illustrated by another tale out of the Bodhidharma cycle that was referred to earlier. One traditional account tells us that in denying that Emperor Wu had any merit Bodhidharma was trying to save him from a cause planted in a past life when he too had been a monk. He lived in the mountains, and every day, when he tried to meditate under his favorite tree, a monkey would come, jump around in the tree, and shake the branches to disturb him. Finally, after many days, in exasperation, he caught the monkey, placed it in a small cave, and blocked the entrance with stones so that he could have some peace and quiet. Although he fully intended to let the monkey out after he had finished meditating, he forgot all about it until several days later and then found that it had already died. The tale continues by informing us that the monkey was reborn as a revolutionary bandit, who, some years after Bodhidharma's visit to Emperor Wu, trapped the Emperor in a pagoda, where he starved to death.

The way to the other type of death, the death of self, is just the opposite of that toward the death of change. It leads in a different direction from the quest to set up or to discover a self which is real, permanent, and unchanging. If it is impossible to put a stop to the change which is so harmful to "self", and if fear arises basically because change brings about changes in self which are frightening because they are unknown, the only alternative, the Buddhists suggest, is to go in exactly the opposite direction. One should not only admit the frailty and impermanence of the self but do away with the notion altogether.

On the level of a single thought, this means that death in its negative sense is holding onto a thought, either

grabbing it or pushing it away, and, in either case, refusing to let go of it. Death in this sense is treating our thinking as real and important either because of identification with or rejection of our thoughts. Thus the self is seen as a construct, a pattern of grasping thoughts and not letting them go or come, of identifying with some and rejecting others. And it is this type of "holding pattern" self that creates the field, the framework, for the continuous activity of mental evaluation that we identify with life. The evaluation is of praise and blame, of good and bad, and so forth. The evaluation, the judgment, is important because it contributes to the self-myth of stabilization toward permanence.

What this adds up to is that in order to avoid the fruitless quest for the death of change and in order to allow the self to die, we should neither fear our thoughts nor treat them as real, that is, as "supportive of self" or "destructive to self". To quote the Sixth Patriarch again, "No thought means to be without thought while in the midst of thought" (*Platform Sutra*, op. cit., p. 194).

The process leading to the death of self and, therefore, to enlightenment is the moment by moment imitation of death. Death in this instance refers to a stopping of the ordinary, ongoing life processes which are governed by the self's evaluative clinging to the thoughts: "This is me, this is mine, this is not me, this is not mine." Thus we can reflect: which of our perceptual and cognitive habits is not in the service of this constant process of trying to stop the world, of trying to make the self permanent?

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