

Eastern and Western Perspectives on Death¹.

Understanding death is as important as understanding living

Life is Death and Death is Life

Despite much scientific advancement, most people in the West remain largely ignorant about one of the most profound areas of life: death. Western thinking on death is mostly based on the primitive ideas of ancient ancestors and religious texts. While gender and sex are openly debated, the subject of death is frequently taboo, a topic linked to uneasiness, suffering and depression.

Many avoid the subject of death for fear of being accused of not being optimistic. To those in the East, Western thinking is compared to that of teenage boys who do not want to understand the reality of their girlfriends in case it destroys their illusions. Western thinking on the topic of death is seen as emotionally childlike.

In the East, the subject is less taboo.

In Eastern thinking, the West's attitude to death is seen as unhealthy, the result of a dualistic values system. Genesis 3:3 says death is the result of man's sin, while life is a gift of God. Life is associated with goodness, while death is linked to evil. Everything in Western thinking is either-or, either you are with us or against us. Thinking is binary. This approach views death and life as if they are in conflict. Youth and health are valued, age and decline are not. So the elderly in the West are neglected and isolated. It is frightening and horrible to be elderly in the West today. Death is devalued.

In the West, an idea is not accepted unless it is proven as correct. In the East, ideas are accepted until they are proven to be false. In the West, that which is not proven is false. In the East, what is not proven may still be accepted as true until it is shown to be otherwise. In the West, there is A and not-A, which leads to bigotry against not-A.

In the East, A and not-A are seen as two sides of the same thing. There is more interest in the integration of knowledge. Thinking is by nature inclusive. Western philosophy, on the other hand, is exclusive. It focusses on distinctions in knowledge, in separation. As a consequence, it focusses on one half of human existence, on life. This creates an unhealthy attitude to death.

While Western thought is based on conflicting dualism, Eastern thinking is based on *complimentary* dualism, on understanding the wholeness of reality, not the individual parts. So Eastern philosophy is more concerned with the problems of life and death. Death is important because of life, and life is important because of death. To be old is valuable because the values accumulated during life can be retained, even in death.

The Bardo Thödol, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, offers practical instructions on life as well as death. It is a manual for both. The book is said to be "the first coldly scientific and reasoned analysis of the after-life state uncontaminated by guesswork"². Those who have been close to death in the West confirm much of what it says.

1 These pages draw heavily on the book "*Death and Beyond in the Eastern Perspective*" Jung Young Lee, (1974), Gordon and Breach, New York.

2 Sahel

The Bardo Thödol is complemented by China's I Ching (YiJing, or the Tao, The Way) though the authors of each book were not aware of the other. I Ching says that change is the ultimate reality. It is change that creates things, reproduces them, and changes them again. Death is seen as the changes in consciousness which take place before, during and after dying. Both the conscious and the unconscious are within the realm of change, they are two sides of the same thing. Change transforms things. Similarly, life and death are two sides of the same thing, opposites that are *essentially* undifferentiated, even though they are *existentially* differentiated. Rather than dualism, 1 or 0, they are viewed as a continuum. Opposites are not in conflict but complimentary to each other.

Change changes all things, but change itself is changeless

The Tao, The Way, means moving along and standing still simultaneously (the original characters mean this). It is changing and yet unchanging at the same time. Change is the constant that does not change. The presence of change is unchanging.

Life is death, death is life.

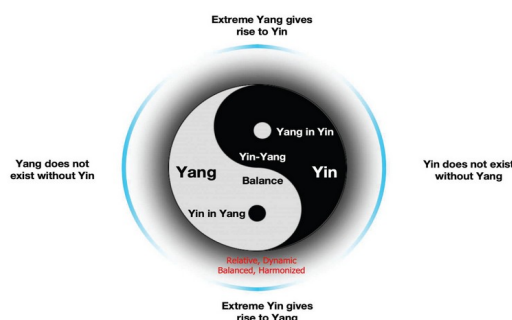
In Western societies, people do all they can to resist death; it is viewed as the enemy of life. Death undermines survival and all that Darwinian/Spencerian thought which is based on the notion of survival. Those in the West seek to prolong life and *intensify* it. Western civilisation as a whole is fundamentally a human reaction to the power of death³. In the Christian Resurrection, an idea central to Western thought, life overcomes death, and triumphs.

This is a denial of reality. Death can't be defeated in the end, and yet its existence is consciously dismissed in the West. It is a superficial approach, because it does not attempt to solve any of the problems of death. Instead, it intensifies and mystifies death's reality. Death is the enemy of life. Good and evil, light and dark, life and death - they are all viewed dualistically, one the enemy of the other.

Just as yang cannot exist without yin, good cannot exist without evil, and life cannot exist without death. There is no way to separate life from death because one can't exist without the other. Where there is no life there is no death, and where there is no death there is no life. The intrinsic unity in the two means it's possible to say that in life there is death, just as in death there is life. They are *essentially* one, the same, but *existentially* two.

Yin = death

Yang = life



Referring to the yin-yang symbol above: there are two parts, mutually intertwined in harmony. The light side has a dark dot, the dark side a light one. This is intended to show that light is not absolute, it also has dark within, and that dark is not absolute as it also has light. The light side presupposes

the existence of dark, and vice versa. In the light side, the dark is small and hard to see, and vice versa. As the light increases, the dark decreases, and as the dark increases, the light decreases. Like the day, which reaches a maximum level of light before darkening, the night does the opposite. In the same way, life reaches a peak and then fades. It's a natural process, a transition. One state is always relative to the other. As one side grows, the other decays, and vice versa.

To speak of yin is to speak of yang at the same time, just as to speak of life means we must also speak of death. One is explicit, the other implicit. One is in the foreground, one in the background. Death is in life but unmanifested, and life is in death, unmanifested. Midday is the greatest intensification of light and the greatest de-intensification of darkness. Midnight is the opposite. Both are the extreme poles of the two. As soon as one reaches its maximum, it starts to retreat towards its minimum. At their maximum point each begins to yield to the other. Dark is light unmanifested while light is dark unmanifested. The light is light because there is darkness and the dark is dark because there is light. One needs to understand both to see the whole. They are mutually dependent.

Life is death unmanifested, and death is life unmanifested. Death is the background to life, and vice versa. They are mutually dependent, inter-related, because they are essentially undifferentiated, the same.

Think of silence and sound. When we hear music, we do not hear the silence behind it, but it's still there. When the music stops we hear it again. Silence is sound unmanifested, and vice versa. They are one, but manifest in two different phenomena. Sound is silence vibrated, it is a change in the waves. Silence is sound unvibrated.

Take the law of conservation of energy, which is derived from the Special Theory of Relativity, expressed as $E = mc^2$. Energy is equal to mass times the speed of light squared.

In other words, the equation proves that within energy there is mass and within mass there is energy, as long as certain existential conditions are met. They are not separate but different manifestations of the same thing. Energy is mass unmanifested and mass is energy unmanifested.

So... death is defined in terms of life and life is understood in terms of death. To separate one is to dismiss them both, because they are the same thing. Death cannot be the enemy of life. The two complement each other and fulfil each other. To separate life from death is to make life incomplete and meaningless.

This also means that life and death must share the same vitality.

It's also important to remember that life and death are human ideas. Such a distinction is meaningless from the standpoint of eternity.

Creatures live to die, because this is the fulfilment of life, the end of one part of the cycle. Without life there is no death and without death there is no life. To separate them is meaningless, because together they are what make existence.

Death is Birth, and Birth is Death

Death is the end for the living manifestation, but the beginning of the dead one. Birth is the beginning for the living, and the end for the dead manifestation. Both death and birth begin at the same point, at the moment of change. They both begin at the same place and end at the same place.

Dying is the beginning for the death phase. Dying is the birth of death, the beginning.

According to this way of thinking, everything in the universe, including birth and death, has yin and yang, because everything is in the process of change. Birth is the renewal and regeneration of the old while death is the degeneration of the new.

So it's possible to talk of the idea of "the life of death". Like Life, if the cycle of yin and yang is correct, death must go through a period of expansion and contraction too.

Is there a spirit, or soul?

We cannot prove or disprove the existence of the soul but we can make certain statements that might support the possibility.

The concept of yin and yang, of there being two sides balanced together in harmony, a phenomenon repeated throughout the universe, suggests that there should be a counter-side to our physical existence. It suggests that there is a spiritual body and a physical body that are complimentary to each other. If one exists, then so must the other, according to yin-yang thinking. This also means that if we deny the existence of the spiritual body, we deny the existence of the physical one. One is active, one is inactive. Both are interdependent.

If this is so, and if one side always contains a part of the other (in dark there is light) then some element of the physical body must remain when we die, within the spiritual body.

That appears to make no sense, because no part of the physical body remains when someone dies.

To understand this means we need to understand the nature of the physical body more carefully. On one level the body is a collection of cells and bits of tissue. But there is more to it than that. There are also the psychic and mental structures. There is consciousness, there is essence.

Think of a knife, which is defined by its function. There is no knife without its sharpness, just as there is no sharpness without the knife. It's essence is its function, not its physicality.

The physical body is the foreground to the spiritual body while the spiritual body is the background to the physical one. The spiritual body is the manifestation of the spirit. It is consciousness that is the manifestation, which is at its most feeble when we die, and which grows when we live.

Just as mass and energy are the same, the Law of Conservation of Matter says matter cannot be destroyed.

There is a radical transformation of energy at the time of death, a transition from mass to energy, in the form of consciousness, so that the mental contents can be retained, in certain patterns and ideas, after life. Western medical studies confirm this observation. At the moment of death, and for some time after, brain activity is often extremely high, and comes in waves.

Consciousness is the flip-side of unconsciousness. One is manifest within the physical body, one in the spiritual.

According to the Bardo Thödol, the spiritual body, the inverse process of existence, is made visible to us in six ways, three ways when we are alive, and during the three stages of death. All of life and

death is made up of transition states, periods of existence which change from one to another, because everything changes, everything is a process of change.

The first way the spiritual body is visible to us is in dreams, when we are unconscious. We can also experience the other side when we are in the womb, and when we enter a state of deep meditation, though for most people in the West this is unknown. The experience can be replicated however, by taking LSD or mescaline.

The other three manifestations of the spiritual body's existence are during the three non-living, non-physical body stages. The first of these comes at the moment of death. The second is the state of being dead that comes after, the moment of Reality of Death, or Luminosity, when the dead realise they are dead and face having to review their lives. The final period is during reincarnation. During the rebirth, at the time of the dawning, the dead remain unconscious of the light for some time. This continues during the first three years of life when we usually do not remember anything at all, even though our lives restart at conception.

When we die, and when we are dead, there are opportunities to escape this cycle of rebirth, though we need to understand them if we are to be successful. To escape the endless cycle of life and death we need to learn certain lessons in life, and know what to do when we die. The reward, says the book, is a transition to a higher level of consciousness.

Supporting evidence

Evidence to support these ideas, and strengthen the case for there being a soul, can be found in the countless reports of those who have had near-death experiences. These mirror the early stages of the process of dying described in the Bardo Thödol. People describe a bright white light ahead them, with their life being replayed before them. Individual experiences are not identical, however. Just as every life is different, so is every death. Each of us experiences death in our own way.

The way death is experienced is a reflection of a person's life and state of mind when they enter the first stages of the transition. After death it is important for the spirit to distinguish between clear lights and dull lights. There are six dull coloured lights, each with a different meaning. White, for example, is Devas, spiritual beings. The dull coloured smoke is Hell. We should not be afraid of these lights, or be attracted to them, because they are reflections of our mind, of our lives. To overcome them and escape, the dead need to understand this and master the art of non-thought.

In the Bardo Thödol, three numbers are often repeated - three, five and 49. There are three Bardos of death, and three Bardos of life, as well as the three bodies of the Buddha, the sources of enlightenment. There are also the three elements of the Christian Trinity. Five is commonly repeated because of the first five days of each Bardo, and the five elements - water, fire, earth, matter and air. Finally, the number 49 is important because it is the maximum expansion of the sacred number seven - $7 \times 7 = 49$. There are 49 stations of active existence, 49 days of mourning in traditional Chinese culture, and 49 days between life and rebirth, though not should not to be taken literally.

In the process of death, most people realise what is happening before they actually die. Once they have accepted they are about to die, they typically live for up to seven days, though usually for only three or four. The exact time depends on the mental and physical state of the dying person. A peaceful mental state is important. Those who are unwilling to die, and who fight the transition, must learn more about the meaning of life. The art of living is also the art of dying. In the West, there is an unwillingness to die and this is thought to produce unfavourable results afterwards. People resist what they should not, which creates difficulties. In the same way, the Western medical

establishment should not prolong or interfere in the process. Dying unconscious, and full of opiates, is not a good way to make the transition because the mind, the consciousness, should be active. Those who are asleep as they approach death should be wakened gently, through pressing on the arteries.

The moment of death is crucial for it determines our future existence. Be ready, with your bags packed and a tranquil heart, said Pope John. A good death frees the soul from the eternal cycle of living and dying, and allows us to find eternal life. Death is the moment when we discover our true selves, something which was hidden in the abyss of our unconsciousness.

The dying person needs enough faith to accept the Clear Light of the Void without fear. This is why the Bardo Thödol says the dying person should be fully awake at the moment of death, not sleeping. When the Light comes, his heart stops. Then, the body should not be touched by others, for the dying person is alone the captain of his soul at this moment. No relative or partner should weep or wail. There should be no sound. For the dying this is the moment of self liberation. Dying in a hospital, away from home, is distressing. It is not a good way to die, because it makes it harder for the person to be aware of the moment of death. A hospital death can be as bad as the death facing a shell-shocked soldier on a battlefield.

At the moment of death a tremendous [intensity of energy is created](#). The Bardo Thödol describes what Western doctors are discovering. (For an easier to digest article on this topic see [this article](#) and also this [Guardian article](#).) The light of the dying body appears as Astral light, intense radiation, which the living cannot see.

The Bardo Thödol then describes the next stage of death, which happens only if the dying person is unable to liberate themselves in the Light of the Void, and break the cycle. Then come visions of their past life, and the realisation that they are dead. This is where people talk of seeing themselves as a body on operating table from above, or hearing the weeping of friends. It begins the process of reincarnation, with the coloured lights, with visions of deities, with manifestations of good and bad.

There are countless examples of people whose behaviour cannot be easily explained without reincarnation - talking in ancient languages as a children, for example. The phenomenon of reincarnation was also an accepted notion in the New Testament; it is what happens to Jesus. At the Council of Constantinople on 553AD however, the church changed its mind and formally rejected the idea.

There are several reasons why the West continues to reject the idea of reincarnation. In the West, the thinking of both science and religion is based on the linear movement of history. Time moves in a line, with history seen as a constant advancement of progress. In the Bible too, there is movement from promise to fulfilment, from a beginning to an end.

In Eastern traditions, time is not viewed as lineal. The Eastern perspective is now supported by contemporary developments in astronomical science too, by the General Theory of Relativity which says space is curved. Everything which moves along the space takes a curved path. Everything moves along a circle, or an ellipse, including time.

The West's rejection of the idea of reincarnation also stems from its belief in heaven and hell, in the idea that there are places where the dead go and stay forever. This negates the idea of reincarnation too.

What happens after death depends entirely on the person dying, who is the captain of his soul. He alone is responsible for his own liberation from the cycle, and that ability depends on what he *is*. According to the law of Karma, one's destiny is conditioned by one's past. This is why it is said that life is the stage of preparation for death, and much depends on the dying person's last thoughts. Whisper the right idea to the dying, chant the same words, to help the dying person escape from the dying illusions and break free from the cycle. Help them move into the light. Even the dead can hear the instructions apparently.

What the Bardo Thödol teaches is essentially the process of self-control and self-realisation at death.