

Death Anxiety and Buddhist Schools

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Sigmund Freud defined the death drive as one of the two basic instincts out of his research on anxiety.¹ Since then, research on death anxiety has received great interest from psychologists, and it was found that death anxiety was associated with psychiatric symptoms, including anxiety, depression, obsession-compulsion, social anxiety, somatization, etc. The significance of its impact, however, was found moderated by pleasant and unpleasant beliefs about life-after-death.² Death anxiety comprised of the fear of the unknown, fear of suffering, fear of loneliness, and fear of personal extinction. They lead to an increased level of materialism, due to the pursuit of symbolic immortality, and ironically resulting in a much lower satisfaction of life.³ In short, mental health was found greatly affected by what people believe in the life-after-death.

All major religions in the world have an answer for their followers in terms of what would happen after-life. Christians believed in an eternal soul ascending to paradise or condemned to hell upon death. Hindus believed in an eternal *ātman* that reincarnates in *samsāra* forever. In Buddhism, the Blessed One explicitly said that “death is stressful” (SN 56.11). However, he did not encourage us to speculate on life after death. When Vacchagotta asked the Blessed One on the existence of the “self” (soul), the Blessed One was “silent” (SN 44.10). What the Blessed One advocated was a middle path transcending eternalism or annihilationism. In Kaccayanagotta Sutta, the Buddha explicitly stated,

¹ Sigmund Freud, James Strachey, & Alix Strachey, *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (WW Norton & Company, 1977), pp. 57-58.

² Kevin J. Flannelly, Christopher G. Ellison, & Kathleen Galek, “Beliefs about Life-after-Death, Psychiatric Symptomology and Cognitive Theories of Psychopathology,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 36.2 (2008), p. 94.

³ T. Kasser & K. M. Sheldon, “Of Wealth and Death: Materialism, Mortality Salience and Consumption Behavior,” *Psychological Science* 11.4 (2000), pp. 348-351.

“Everything exists”: That is one extreme. “Everything doesn’t exist”: That is a second extreme. Avoiding these two extremes, the Tathagata teaches the Dhamma via the middle... (SN 12.15)⁴

However, the death anxiety drive was so significant that Buddhist followers were always swayed towards eternalism, which could arguably lower death anxiety by a large extent.

Reincarnation during the Time of the Buddha

In order to understand how death anxiety might have affected the development of Buddhism, it would be important to understand the beliefs on life after death during and after the time of Siddhartha Bodhisattva.

Since the Aryans settlement at around 1200 B.C.E., Brahmanism (and its later form, Hinduism) had become the mainstream religious belief in India. At around 500 B.C.E., the Upaniṣad was compiled as the foundational philosophical text for Brahmanism. Under the Upanishadic philosophy, every individual was believed to have a soul, namely *ātman*, and the purpose of life was to unite *ātman* with the cosmic principle, namely *Brahman*, through the practice of yoga. This could be seen as a typical religious response to anxiety of annihilation after death. As long as the human had a soul that could exist forever, regardless of its nature, there would be no need to worry about annihilation. Besides, if uniting with Brahman was the purpose and the resulting state would be blissful, life would then have a meaning and a goal to strive for. Materialistic pursuit would simply be temporary and not worthy of the effort. Religion would then gain its importance in the life of the general population.

On the other hand, a popular religion would need to explain why leading an ethical life could result in eternal bliss. It might simply claim that the creator god was a righteous one and would only invite the righteous soul to his paradise. Brahmanism proposed the concept of *karma* in this matter. During the Upanishadic period, many different schools emerged, speculating whether moral actions would have any effects or consequences, in other words, whether *karma* existed. The general Brahman belief was good deeds would create good *karma*, which would then lead to a rebirth in a more blissful plane of existence, and bad deeds would lead to a rebirth

⁴ “Kaccayanagotta Sutta: To Kaccayana Gotta (on Right View)” (SN 12.15), Trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 30 November 2013. Web. 19 February 2014, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn12/sn12.015.than.html>

in a woeful plane. For this theory to work, there were two pre-conditions: that rebirth or reincarnation (Skt: *saṃsāra*) existed, and that *karma* could be carried from life to life, across the boundary of death. Therefore, while the concept of reincarnation was not established in the beginning, it gradually emerged in Brahmanism.⁵

The Goal of Nirvāṇa

It was at that time that Siddhartha Bodhisattva himself went forth in the pursuit of enlightenment. Legend said that he made the decision upon seeing the scenes of an old man, a sick man, and notably a corpse. This signified a typical scene that would trigger death anxiety among normal people. One might argue that death anxiety motivated Siddhartha Bodhisattva to seek the ultimate liberation from this world, whether reincarnation existed or not.

When Siddhartha Bodhisattva was at the verge of enlightenment, Mara the Evil One was also said to use fear of death as one of his weapons to deter Siddhartha Bodhisattva. The story of Mara illustrated that death anxiety, apart from sensual pleasures and difficulties in understanding the path, was considered to be a key barrier to enlightenment. Nevertheless, Siddhartha Bodhisattva overcame the temptation and threats, achieved enlightenment and became the Buddha. His path started with the four noble truths, beginning with the cause of suffering, which enlisted birth, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair (SN 56.11).

Looking closer at the list of sufferings, most of them would arise together in the face of death. When a man is dying, he would either be suffering from aging or pain from illness, he would feel despair as he could do nothing, he would feel sorry, and he would have to separate from his loved ones. Death should be considered as a highly stressful event, and it would not be surprising for an ordinary person to have high death anxiety. The analysis of the cause of suffering led the Buddha to conclude that “everything is impermanent,” hence death and suffering were all inevitable. A teaching such as this, confirming the reality of death, did very little in relieving believers of death anxiety.

Therefore, from the first noble truth, the Buddha proceeded to analyze the cause of suffering, and he derived the profound teaching of co-dependent arising (Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*;

⁵ Ibid, p. 18.

DN 15). From birth, the Buddha deduced the rest of the cause recursively, namely becoming, clinging, feeling, contact, name-and-form, consciousness, etc. These were collectively called the twelve *nidānas* or causes. The idea was that if one could break any one of these *nidānas*, one would break the whole cycle and be liberated.

Just like a tree was a conditional result of sufficient sunshine, water, soil, and a seed, a person was a conditional result of having a name and a body form from parents, consciousness from sensation and perception, an existence from prior clinging and becoming, etc. Removing any conditions would eliminate the conditions for life to exist, and hence extinguish life. The end state of Early Buddhism was always named *nirvāṇa*, with the root of the word meaning “extinguishing.” It was defined as “the resolution of all fabrications, the relinquishment of all acquisitions, the ending of craving, dispassion, [and] cessation” (AN 3.32). The goal of *nirvāṇa*, if not understood correctly, would not help relieve death anxiety, and hence the later Buddhist schools had developed many different concepts. Most of them fell towards eternalism.

Different Sectarian Views

After the Buddha entered *parinirvāṇa*, the monastic community underwent a number of schisms. While the first schism between *Sthaviras* and *Mahāsāṃghikas* during the Second Council appeared to be a dispute on the precepts, the subsequent schisms were due to philosophical and doctrinal differences. The key disagreements concerned the existence of self, eternal life, and causal relationship. The anxiety about death was again hinted at in these discussions, with the causal relationship a bit more indirectly related.

To understand the schisms, one would need to understand the concept of existence in Buddhism. When questions about soul, reincarnation, life after death, etc. had to be discussed, existence of life had to be defined first. Put it in a plain way, if a man entered heaven after death, which part of the man entered heaven? It would definitely not be his body, which would be decaying underground. In that case, what would that remaining part be? In other words, what could persist through death (and rebirth, if existed)? This had become an important question, before any religious doctrine could reduce death anxiety of their followers.

To eliminate the clinging to and craving for life, the Buddha refuted any kind of “self” existence. Using the doctrine of co-dependent arising, life was interpreted as a conditional

existence based on five aggregates, namely form, feeling, perception, (mental) fabrication, and consciousness, and they manifested in “past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near” (SN 22.48). Human existence would thus be understood as a phenomenal existence out of these underlying components, subject to changes under different conditions. During the Sectarian (or Nikāya) Buddhism period, these aggregates were further analyzed into over a hundred elemental entities, named “*dharma*,” and henceforth began the *abhidharma* tradition

Abhidharmikas believed that *dharma* were the real existing factors that created the phenomenal world and all living beings, the ingredients for co-dependent arising to work. It was on this common ground that schools such as *Sarvāstivāda* and *Sautrāntika* argued over a variety of doctrinal issues; for instance, what kind of *dharma* would actually exist for eternality, and what would not?

To illustrate the argument, we could look at the doctrine of *Sarvāstivāda*. While the Blessed One tried to break up our existence into five aggregates (SN 22.79), the *Sarvāstivādins* assured their followers that the aggregates and even the underlying *dharma* were all going to last forever. They existed in the past, present, and future. The *Sarvāstivādin* were thus getting dangerously close to eternalism because the majority of *dharma* were defined as our mental processes.⁶ If they were to exist in the past, present, and future simultaneously, an eternal “soul” was implied. One could imagine a string that extended from the beginning of time to the end of it, if time had a beginning and an end, and when someone touched any point on the string, the whole string would be vibrating simultaneously. Why would *Sarvāstivādin* propose this kind of doctrine, despite its eternalistic sounding? Apparently, they were trying to solve the dilemma of incorporating memory and karma under the momentary co-dependent arising mechanism. When we did something in the past, the karma could now be transmitted through this “string;” similarly, when we tried to remember experience in the past, long vanished, the past *dharma* could still create the experience as memory for now through this “string.” Deep down, it could still be the same old fear in face of nihilistic death.

⁶ K. L. Dhammajoti. *Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma* (Hong Kong: Centre of Buddhist Studies, The University of Hong Kong, 2007), pp. 145-149.

When the Fourth Council was convened, *Sarvastivāda* was further split and the *Sautrāntika* school emerged. Remembering the teaching of the Blessed One, *Sautrāntikas* refuted this eternalistic theory, and advocated that our life existed as a stream of moments, and that only the present moment existed. However, refuting the continuity of time would pose difficulties in explaining continuity of life, even in the current one. Hence they proposed the concept of mental seeds (*bīja*), which were past experiences captured in a latent state. These mental seeds were stored in the store-house consciousness named *ālaya-vijñāna*. They used this construct to explain the mechanism of *karma*, which was unique among Buddhist sects. Other schools such as Pudgalavādins went even further towards eternalism with concepts like “aggregated person” (*pudgala*).⁷

The Buddhist construct of *pudgala* was one closest to the Brahman construct of *ātman*. Orthodox sects such as the *Theravāda* school seriously criticized the concept of *pudgala* as a heresy in Buddhism, but just like the others, they were forced to solve the misery of memory *karma*, and the simple stream of unified consciousness experienced by people in their daily life. They had hence invented the idea of subconscious mind (*bhavaṅga-viññāna*) to explain continuity across sleep and eventually death. That was proven a futile attempt to pull Buddhism back from the eternalistic tendency.

New sects endorsing *pudgala* continued to emerge, such as *Vātsīputrīyas* who argued that “the *pudgala* was neither identical to nor separate from the aggregates. *Mahāsaṅghikas* proposed the existence of “basic consciousness” whereas *Mahīśāsakas* proposed the eternity of aggregates. Even the *Dārṣāntikas*, who criticized *Sarvastivāda* and were close to *Theravāda*, extended the subconscious mind from *Theravāda* eventually to a more subtle subconscious mind that could persist through death and rebirth.

The True Dharma

The pull to eternalism was finally countered by Nāgārjuna, who tried to restore the Middle Path of the Buddha. In his *Mūla-Mādhyamakakārikā*, it was clearly stated that we are neither permanent (*aśāśvatam*) nor annihilated (*anucchedam*), and that this life and the next are neither identical (*anekārtham*) nor different (*anānārtham*). We do not have a beginning

⁷ Akira Hirakawa, *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Śākyamuni to Early Mahāyāna*, Trans. Paul Groner, (University of Hawaii Press, 1990), pp. 105-196.

(*anutpādam*) nor an ending (*anirodham*), and we are not going to leave *saṃsāra* (*anāgamam*) nor are we coming back (*anirgamam*).⁸ While these eight negations may seem paradoxical and even enigmatic, it was most aligned with the original teachings of the Blessed One.

Life can be perceived as a domino. Every piece falls as a result of the last piece. It is a series of cause and effect. When we look from a distance, it seems something is moving forward. When you look closely to every piece, nothing is really moving. Same can be said of the wave. Countless waves move from the ocean to the shore, but the water never leaves the ocean.

Life can also be perceived as a forest. A forest comprises of trees, grasses, flowers, insects, animals, river, etc. However, there is not a single thing called forest. The trees inside the forest may die and its seeds may grow, but the forest will not die as a whole. The forest is just a concept, and there are underlying compounds that keep changing and are impermanent. The seemingly permanent forest is just a conceptual proliferation (*papañca*). Its nature is therefore “empty” (*śūnyatā*). Similarly, life is made up of aggregates and dharma, previous lives and the coming ones. Life, however, is “empty” like the forest.

You cannot say that a forest does not exist, nor you can say that it exists. You cannot say that the domino is not moving, nor you can say that it moves. This is the middle path. A Buddhist should always bear this in mind. When a Pure Land Buddhist prays to the Amitābha Buddha (*nenbutsu*), it should be borne in mind that even Pure Land is a temporary and well-conditioned place for practitioners to achieve Buddhahood. It was not meant to be a paradise for eternity. When a Zen Buddhist meditates on emptiness, it does not mean that the whole world is an illusion (*māyā*). The world does exist and is real, just like the trees and birds in the forest are all real.

In that case, what would be the goal of life? Were we supposed to achieve liberation, enter paradise, or attain *nirvāṇa*? To Nāgārjuna, it would not matter. Liberation, paradise, or *nirvāṇa* were all just mental fabrication, just a name people created for something unknown, speculated. He stated that:

⁸ David J. Kalupahana, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā of Nagarjuna: The Philosophy of the Middle Way* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1991), pp. 1-2.

*na nirvāṇa-samāropo na saṃsārāpakarṣaṇam
yatra kas tatra saṃsāro nirvāṇam kiṃ vikalpyate*

Wherein there is neither the attribution of freedom nor the elimination of the life-process, what is it that is being discriminated as life-process or as freedom?⁹

Here, nirvāṇa was translated as “freedom,” a being free from grasping and thus suffering. It was not described as a psychological state existing in the mind of meditation, nor was it a real plane of existence to be comprehended as heaven. To him, this ultimate state would be simply understood as a peaceful state:

... there is no denial of arising (*utpāna*) or that which is presently arising (*utpadyamāna*)... there is no denial of cessation (*vyaya*) either... there is no denial of “dependent arising” (*pratīyasamutpāda*) or that which is dependently arisen (*pratītya yad yad bhavati*)... the belief in eternal existence (*astitva, bhāva*) and nihilistic non-existence (*nāstitva, abhāva*) lead to the unfortunate consequences such as grasping (*upādāna*) and therefore, suffering (*duḥkha*). The avoidance of such perspectives... were considered as being “inherently peaceful” (*svabhāvataḥ śāntam*).¹⁰

Our “self” would not reside in a paradise called “*nirvāṇa*” because if we existed in *nirvāṇa*, and *nirvāṇa* existed as a real plane of existence, both our beings and the plane of *nirvāṇa* would decay and perish one day. It would have to be sustained under some conditions, because in a world of co-dependent arising, nothing could exist without the existence of its conditions. In that case, an eternal soul that could live in an eternal heaven would not be possible at all. Life itself could be free, here and now could be *nirvāṇa*, because there was no life-process without freedom, and there was no freedom without life-process. Nāgārjuna concluded that:

*sūnyeṣu sarva-dharmeṣu kim anantaṃ kim antavat
kim anantam antavac ca nānantaṃ nānantavac ca kiṃ*

⁹ Ibid, p. 241.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 42.

When all things are empty, why [speculate on] the finite, the infinite, both the finite and the infinite and neither finite nor the infinite?¹¹

No matter which Buddhist school we follow, we have to stay on the middle path, avoid conceptual proliferations, which lead us to grasping and thus suffering. By truly understanding the middle path taught by the Blessed One, and also sharing the teaching with others especially the terminally ill, we are reducing death anxiety and fear, which is a great practice on perfection of generosity (*dānapāramitā*) by giving assurance of safety (*abhaya-dāna*) in this *samsāra*. In fact, a hospice program employed a 40-hour Zen practice in their volunteer training, resulting in a significant increase in compassion and decrease in death anxiety.¹² I am sure there will be more and more applications of Buddhist wisdom in the hospice and end-of-life support area in the near future.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 368.

¹² Larry Scherwitz, Marcie Pullman, & Pamela McHenry, "A Contemplative Care Approach to Training and Supporting Hospice Volunteers: A Prospective Study of Spiritual Practice, Well-Being, and Fear of Death." *The Journal of Science and Healing* 2.4 (2006), pp. 304-313.