

## Life as Earthlings

by Rebecca Dixon

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We are of the earth, our body composed of its matter, our mind influenced by its rhythms. As earthlings, we have a deep relationship with all life on this planet, but which we have often obscured from ourselves. We can't really "go to nature" and enjoy it. We *are* nature.

We have just built structures to separate us from the annoying aspects of this planet, like bugs and bad weather. We're not alone in this. Bees, termites, beavers and many other social animals have done the same. When we do "go to" nature, we're often just reminding ourselves that we are earthlings by visiting some trees.

Nature, this planet, consists of cycles. Even animals that spend years as larvae are on a cycle, like the millions of mayflies bursting out of the water on the same day to mate and die before sunset. Most life starts as some kind of seed, then grows, ages and dies. We do the same.

Most people in Western societies have managed to distance themselves mentally from the earth, and now need a cognitive shift about our "nature" to understand that we are *embodied* awareness. Our bodies are composed of earth-matter, passed on to us by our mothers and sustained by what we eat.

Our brains perceive the world around us. We interact with the life around us as we grow up and then age. The process of dying is part of life; I've heard many hospice patients insist that they were still very much alive. Just like all other forms of life, our bodies age and die, all within the vastness of our awareness.

Forests around the world follow this cycle. A magnificent tree eventually falls, opening a space for other plants to thrive in newly accessible sunlight. The downed tree, like all other life in the forest, becomes compost feeding other lifeforms, all the way from fungi that extend for acres beneath the surface, to frogs, eagles and bears. All living beings die and by doing so enable life to continue on this earth.

People have sought to separate themselves from this cycle through burial practices. But Tibetan culture still follows the cycle of life on this earth through the practice of sky burial, placing corpses on mountaintops for the birds.

Hindus at the burning ghats in Varanasi release the ashes of their dead into Mother Ganga. By the way, researchers have found evidence that there really is something in the water near Varanasi that cleans the Ganges up.

This cycle of life is universal. Without it, earth would not be a living planet. It's said the most remarkable thing about humans is that we all know everyone dies, but still believe we and our loved ones will be the exceptions.

In a sutta called The Mustard Seed, the Buddha was approached by a village woman carrying her dead baby. She begged the Buddha to restore her child to life. He answered that he couldn't help her unless she brought him mustard seeds from a house where death was unknown.

She went to every house in the village but, no matter how kind the people were, they couldn't help because they all had lost loved ones. After seeing both how inevitable death is, and how compassionate people were, and feeling her own soothing compassion for them, she returned to the Buddha and gently put her baby down.

We Westerners don't talk about death. Every time I bring it up, I meet a subtle but powerful resistance. Like maybe right now. Yet this culturally imposed silence feeds our fear of death, causing us even more suffering. Different cultures have different levels of aversion to death. Ours is close to the top – we even avoid the *word*, calling it “passing” or “transition.”

In contrast, Hindus who take their loved ones to Varanasi are participating in a communal act of love for their dead, who fervently wanted to be cremated there. The cremation ceremonies are therefore festive tributes to their loved one.

Our attitude toward death is influenced in large part by our beliefs about an “afterlife.” I've heard many atheists, and agnostics such as myself, talk as if there's a heaven or hell, either in jest or quite seriously. The worldview in which we're raised is deeply ingrained.

When the Buddha was asked about the afterlife, he said thinking about “what happens after death” is either a waste of time, or it will make you crazy. The heaven/hell dichotomy in which Christians, Muslims and some Jews are raised pervades Western culture, and can make us fear death irrationally.

As a hospice volunteer, one of my duties was to provide emotional and spiritual support to the patients. The most disturbed resident of the hospice ward I met was a lapsed Catholic who claimed to have done unspeakably evil things. His fear of dying was palpable.

He was convinced he would be in hell the moment he died. He was so ashamed of his past deeds and so terrified of hell that he couldn't even talk to a priest for absolution. My compassion for him opened my heart to his suffering. It was horrible.

Tibetan Buddhism really emphasizes our preparedness for dying. A central purpose of Tibetan practice is to be ready to meet death. Practitioners believe that being mindful at that moment will result in a good rebirth.

In contrast, a Zen master on his deathbed, surrounded by members of the sangha he led, told them not to fret because, he said, “Nothing happens.” I have treasured this story as a valuable koan. Does it mean we’re dead and that’s it, just nothing? Or does it refer to our essential emptiness? And what does that mean?

The Buddha made it simple. His students often asked what they were, and what they would be after death. He evaded or criticized those questions, telling his students to just be mindful. This is not an easy answer to give.

When I had just begun teaching, my new next-door neighbor was a woman in end-stage emphysema. I would visit and sit next to her bed, sometimes reading to her or just talking. One day she asked me what dying was like.

I said it was like waiting in a grocery line. She reacted like I was crazy. As gently as I could, I explained that dying is part of life, an experience like any other. How it affects us is determined by the state of mind we bring to it.

Another cause of fear is our belief that death is painful and horrific. Sometimes it is, like during war or terrible injuries, but it doesn’t have to be. We have modern medicine and legal documents to help avoid intense suffering. The problem isn’t dying, it’s our society’s stubborn aversion and denial of it.

Our society’s attitudes toward death are expensive to us all. They can keep doctors as talented as the Laguna Honda hospice ward’s brilliant Dr. Kerr from even going into palliative care. In the two and a half years I spent in Dr. Kerr’s ward for one day every week, only one of his patients, just once, reported having pain. I immediately hailed a nurse and within the hour he was comfortable again.

Most hospice patients went on living fairly actively until their last few days. I made friends with a man who loved to have me take him shopping, and I had trouble keeping up with him. His last days were free of pain.

Although I’m a confirmed agnostic about any possible “afterlife,” I totally agree with Tibetan Buddhism that it’s terribly important to prepare for dying. Even considering ways to prepare can help relax our aversion to the immutable fact that part of our lives will be our deaths.

You're probably aware that Thich Nhat Hanh died this past week. I'm sure he followed his own advice to practice with the five remembrances which, he wrote,

"helps us accept many of our deepest fears - such as old age, sickness, and death - as realities, facts we cannot escape. When we practice accepting these truths, we can realize peace and have the capacity to live conscious, healthy, and compassionate lives, no longer causing suffering to ourselves and others... Only by looking deeply into the nature of your fear can you find the way out."

A Zen story that can be hard to understand involves a revered teacher traveling with his students. They were met at a crossroads by a man from a nearby village begging the teacher to come help a man who was actively dying. "I'm sorry," said the Zen master, "there's nothing I can do. Go back to your village and keep him comfortable and calm."

Then he walked on, and one of his students confronted him, demanding, "How can you refuse to help?" With the usual Zen inscrutability, the teacher lifted his walking stick to the student's chest and pinned him to the ground. "Now meditate," he told the student.

The point to this story is that death can resemble being pinned to the ground with a stick to your chest if you're not mentally prepared for it. When we're in the active dying process it is too late to train the mind to be ready for it.

We who are still able, though, should commit to getting ready. The dying process is a singular experience, often unlike anything else we've been through. And there are many ways to prepare for it.

We can work with the Five Remembrances, which remind us:

- 1) I am of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old.
- 2) I am of the nature to have ill health. There is no way to escape sickness.
- 3) I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death.
- 4) All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them.
- 5) My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions.

- Also, we can read Stephen Levine's book, [A Year to Live](#), or practice with others based on it.
- We can learn about the dying process, and the unique things that may happen during it. This can prepare us, too, for being with others who are actively dying.
- And we can simply talk about death with those who are able to listen and respond.

At the very least, we should complete forms about what kind of terminal care we want, recognizing that we will not be the sole exception ever to the universal fact of death. An advanced directive will let people know how to treat us as we near death and die.

Medical forms like DNR's will tell emergency and hospital personnel what steps to take to revive us, or not, if death seems imminent. Even with all my practice around dying, I learned a lot in the process of filling these forms out.

If we can meet the end of life without fear, mindfully, then it can be lovely. My partner, Rachel, had a serene and loving death. She told me her desires in advance. All her friends said loving goodbyes. In the late-night hours, she was surrounded by mine and her brother's love, with her eyes locked on mine until the light in hers went out.

Then I spoke to her gently because hearing may be the last form of consciousness, even after death. I wanted to be sure that Rachel's final awareness would be loving acceptance of this extraordinary part of life.

We earthlings, together with all other forms of life, need to take care of what's necessary for our lives on this planet. We need to make sure this includes our *entire* lives. I've found this tenderness toward the whole of my life has expanded to encompass all life and the planet earth itself. It's good to be an earthling.

Thank you