



How to Live If You're Going to Die, by Blanche Hartman

I got a call that a dear friend of mine, who received precepts from me years ago when I lived at Green Gulch, was dying. I arranged with her husband to go and see her and give her the precepts again. One of the things that have been very helpful to me around this matter of birth and death--around this matter of my death, anyhow--is meeting death with great curiosity. What is it? We don't know. We can't know ahead of time. Can we be there for it and find out what this great mystery of birth and death is? When I went to visit my friend Jenny, I said to her, "Well, Jenny, it looks like you're going to find out about the great mystery before Pete and I do." She was on a hospital bed in her room, but she jumped up and threw her arms around my neck and said, "Blanche! It's all about love and joy!" This was less than a week before she died. And so I thank you, Jenny, for that teaching. It's all about love and joy. Can we allow that as a possibility in our heart as we study this great mystery? I know that I find myself, the older I get, imagining whether I could say such a thing on my own deathbed, but it certainly is what I've been talking about as I'm approaching my deathbed. That love and joy are really right here and available for us if we will open up to them. [...]

I came to practice because I discovered that I was going to die--me, personally. I just had never considered it before, but then my best friend, who was my age and had kids the age of my kids, had a headache one night when we were together. It was such a bad headache that she went to the doctor the next morning. She was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor, went into a coma, and died. Whoosh! Maybe a month altogether from the first headache.

Well, that could have been me as readily as Pat. Oh, my god! I'm going to die! But the next thought was, "How do you live if you know you're going to die?" It has been such a gift to me that that question came up. And so I started looking for who could tell me how to live if I know I'm going to die. And I do know I'm going to die. So I'll just share with you these Five Daily Recollections from the Upajjhatthana Sutra of the Buddha:

I'm of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old.
I am of the nature to have ill health. There is no way to escape having ill health.

I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death.
All that is dear to me and everything I have and everything I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape from losing them.

My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground on which I stand.

These Five Daily Recollections seemed to be, for me, some clue to how to live if you know you're going to die. Pay attention to how you live. Pay attention to your actions. Are your actions kind? Are your actions honest? Are your actions supported by the desire to help beings, to benefit beings? Are your actions selfish or generous? How are you living this life?

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