

# A BEAUTIFUL DEATH

## CHAPTER TEN

---

*"When we gain familiarity with open intelligence, then we have nothing to fear; even a terminal illness won't be daunting for us. We are able to be without impediment, whatever the situation is."*

What appearance could be more demanding of us than death? Death is inevitable, and no one is left unaffected. A fundamental human dilemma is that throughout all of our life we know we will eventually die. In acknowledging this universal condition, we develop great sensitivity and compassion for ourselves and for everyone else, because we know that everyone dies, and not just us.

Yet, we should know in a profound way that birth, life and death are all timelessly free appearances of a more fundamental condition. When we become familiar with the reality that all the appearances, including death, are wide-open and have never been made into anything with an independent nature, then when death comes we are ready, and we won't be so troubled by it. Death can then be an easygoing and carefree moment that is complete and identical to any other.

When we maintain open intelligence in the direct experience of any circumstance during our lifetime, it is a preparation for the final experience of death. By the power of sustaining open intelligence, without attempting to correct appearances, all the experiences we encounter in life are a practice for that ultimate experience. Unless we know that dying is just part of the living process, we can be really startled and confused when death appears.

If we're angry and upset that we're dying and we elaborate on that anger, then we'll attempt to cling to life. If we try to avoid death and all the feelings that go along with dying, then we'll be absolutely miserable. If we aren't familiar with open intelligence, then as we are dying we might become frightened and grab on to the data of clinging to life. We would then be desperately holding on to life rather than seeing that we're on the verge of encountering the last experience we will ever have—death. If, however, we become familiar with instantaneous open intelligence during our lives, then when it is present so beautifully and obviously at death, that obvious and empowering open intelligence will be recognized for what it is.

Some years ago my beloved younger sister died of cancer. Her doctors had told her that she had only two months to live, and she informed the whole family about the prognosis. When any family receives news like this, each person has their own response. The news can in some ways force them to look more deeply at who they are, or at least who they take themselves to be, and who they take their dying

family member to be. This occurred for the people in my family and for my sister as well.

Fortunately, my sister's practice of relying on open intelligence was something that she could rely on to support her in preparing for her death. She really came to terms with the fact that this was the end of her life and that she was dying. As it became clear that the end was near, she called us to come and be with her. When she died the family was beside the bed gathered around her. I was in the bed with her holding her hand, and when she took her final breath I could feel her last pulse. She'd been quietly suffering, but along with the suffering there was a sense of great relief and profound peace of mind in her.

With her last breath her face went from being calm with no smile to having the most incredible smile I've ever seen in my life. She was smiling as though she had seen the most beautiful vision one could imagine. Several hours after her death, that smile was still there. She was in a state of utter lucidity and peace—that natural state of utter lucidity that is totally beyond the body.

When we die, if we've previously recognized the reality of what we are, we just slip effortlessly into that natural state of utter lucidity. This lucidity was so clear in her because she was able to accept her death so gracefully due to her practice of gaining confidence in open intelligence. She was so well prepared that her death brought complete relief and the resolution of all data, including those she had had about death.

The simplicity and beauty of her death had an immense power and affected the entire family in a wonderful way. The way she died was actually a form of loving communication, and it had a significant and lasting effect on every one of us. The result was that all the data we had about the others in the family—our judgments and opinions of each other and whom we had taken each other to be based on our past histories—were dissolved.

Sometimes we take people to be their past, and we keep trying to define them with that yardstick. To make ourselves feel more comfortable we need for them to be something we can label, but this prevents us from seeing them as they really are. When my sister died, we were so profoundly touched by witnessing her death, and all of those judgments were erased in each one of us. The subtle and overt tensions, negative patterns and arguments and analysis were dissolved, and our relationships were brought to a new level.

When we talk about the importance of death, it's really essential for us to realize that death is something that we can and should become acquainted with before we die. My sister had gotten to know herself very deeply through her practice of relying on open intelligence. In the Balanced View Training we become familiar with ourselves through a very similar practice, which is the gradual familiarization with

ourselves as open intelligence. Increasingly we become familiar with our true identity—the fundamentally perfect condition that is the nature of everything. That open intelligence is the basis and essence of all our data, including our data about death.

When we die, there is the instantaneous open intelligence that is forever present as well as a complete loss of the memory of life and the absence of any longing to return.

When we gain familiarity with open intelligence, then we have nothing to fear; even a terminal illness won't be daunting for us. We're able to be without impediment, whatever the situation is. This increasing familiarity with open intelligence will carry us through all the doctor's appointments, all the worries about the changes in our lives because of sickness and aging and all the concerns about dying.

The attitude we have towards death either gives us freedom in our life or lack of freedom. If we have the idea that death is the end of us, then we'll consider death to be an enemy, and it will be something that we're scared to death of! We won't want it to happen, because we think it means the end; but thinking that death is the end is just an assumption about the way things are.

At death it is only data that change. There is no other change. If we want to know what it's like to die, then we need only to go to sleep tonight. When we go to sleep, our conceptual framework changes from something in the waking state that seems kind of manageable to something in the dream state that is phantasmagoric where all sorts of images start to appear.

In a similar way, when we're dying the grip loosens and we can no longer keep control of all our experiences in any sort of ordered way. If we have had some practice during our life of not trying to arrange the display of our thoughts, emotions and experiences, then when we die we will not be dismayed by the disorder we may experience.

When we're alive we have certain types of thoughts and emotions, but when we're in the process of dying, those radically alter. We don't have the same kinds of experiences; instead, we have unpredictable experiences that we've never had before. One of the things that will happen is that the different sensory mechanisms of our body will shut down. The eyesight, the ability to feel tactile sensations, the ability to smell things or to hear or respond to what's being said—all of these will go one by one. Finally the breathing and the heartbeat will also stop.

We may have emotions that are new to us regarding the experience of death. We may have thoughts like, "I have eaten my last meal! I will never see my loved ones again! I am going somewhere and no one is going with me!" If throughout our lives we've been indulging, renouncing or replacing our data in order to feel better, then

we won't have the mental energy to do that any longer. Our supposed ability to think our way into well-being or control our thoughts will also be lost. Unless we've learned to rely on open intelligence, none of the strategies we've cultivated during our lifetime for handling disturbing thoughts and emotions will help us when we die.

These are the kind of very powerful thoughts, emotions and experiences we'll have, and it's quite possible that they'll be far more afflictive than anything we've ever experienced before. But if we are relying on open intelligence, it's likely we'll be able to let these things be as they are. We're only distracted when we think something needs to be done about what's appearing. All the thoughts, emotions and sensations that appear at death—we can let them be what they are. Any thought or emotion will disappear in and of itself like a line drawn in water. The appearances have no power whatsoever to affect us unless we let them.

If we haven't relied on open intelligence, the process of death can be very frightening, because it seems that it's all over for us. There can be a desperate struggle to hold on to life. Alternatively, we may be relieved to know that our suffering will end. If, however, we are relying on open intelligence rather than getting lost in the data of dying, then all of our experiences and reactions can be easefully released. We will be empowering the peacefulness of everything just *as it is*.

Open intelligence never changes and is ever present as that which knows all these things that are occurring—not only during the process of death, but during the process of life as well. Open intelligence is that which knows death, but death does not affect open intelligence, just as birth doesn't. We might believe that open intelligence depends on the Earth, sun, time, space or life in order to be present. However, open intelligence is not dependent on anything in order to be naturally present—not the heartbeat, the breath, the warmth of the body or even the universe. When the heartbeat, the breath and the warmth of the body all go and the universe is no more, open intelligence *is*.

The more we empower open intelligence completely, the more we arrive at an experiential realization of this fundamental nature of open intelligence that is beyond all conceptual and intellectual categories. If through relying on open intelligence we have familiarized ourselves with the process of death, then we will be able to be completely at peace when it occurs. When open intelligence gets so brilliant that it outshines everything—including the life and death of the physical body—we'll be able to be totally relaxed and have the complete enjoyment of our true body, which is the body of open intelligence.

Abidance as open intelligence isn't some kind of strange state that only applies to certain people. It is the natural state of all human beings, and the more familiar we are with it, the more comfortable we can be in all circumstances—including the circumstance of death.

**Q:** *In a lot of teachings today we hear about being "unborn." What does that mean exactly in relation to what you are talking about?*

**A:** Most of us take ourselves to be an entity that is destructible, namely the body, and we think that open intelligence is generated by this entity. We assume we are born and that we're going to die. The idea of being born is indoctrinated from early on. Most parents will say after their child is born, "Here is our baby! We are so glad she was born!" and this idea that we were born is constantly being reinforced in us. Death is also very much in the background of everything all the time, because what comes with this idea of being born is the idea that we will die. Once we learn that we are this destructible body, we feel that we can be destroyed in the finality of death. At the same time, we may have some unconscious data that subtly avoid that finality, such as: "Everyone else will die, but I won't. Somehow I am going to escape. Others might get terribly ill, but I won't. I won't age, and I won't die."

In a lot of teachings something may be said about our being "unborn." This proposition goes against everything we've heard so far. First we heard that we're born, and suddenly we hear that we're unborn! What to make of that? The truth is that "being born" is an extreme vantage just as "being unborn" is. What we emphasize in the Balanced View Training is that the unborn and the born are not two. What is it that's aware of either being born or unborn? What we think about as unborn and born has never been separate, and both concepts are due to open intelligence.

This understanding cannot be arrived at through intellectual speculation, but only through the practical experience of completely relaxing body and mind in all circumstances. As complete confidence is gained in open intelligence, perfect mental stability and mental clarity become obvious. I'm not suggesting just sitting around in an easy chair all the time, but rather that we completely relax body and mind in all situations, no matter what may be appearing. Only through profoundly remaining in the fundamental condition can these concepts be understood.

Most of us go through life fearing death, because we believe that we've been born and we'll die and also that we're something solid, stable and finite that will end at death. However, what we call "I" has no independent nature—its only nature is the fundamental condition underlying everything.

**Q:** *I grew up in the sort of religious background that has horrific versions of what can happen after death. I find it really hard to be at ease with these old ideas that I want to be free of, but which seem to still have a hold on me.*

**A:** Some traditions have very complex descriptions of the states after death; but whatever those descriptions are, the key instruction is just to rely on open

intelligence in the direct encounter with all that appears. Know that they are just appearances of open intelligence. No matter what the appearance is, just relax.

As I said earlier, when the physical death of the body occurs, all kinds of appearances can and do arise that we have never seen before. A lot of these appearances have to do with our belief systems. If we have a strong belief in horrible things happening after death, then it's possible that we'll have such data when we die. I'm not saying that these things will happen for everyone, but many people have extremely fixed beliefs about such things, so when they undergo a death experience, then all the belief systems that they've had may be in evidence.

If we're living our whole life focused on ideas of who we take ourselves to be, we're always trying to keep the lid on all the things we don't want to think about—all the negative data, thoughts and emotions. When we begin to rely on open intelligence, what happens? The lid is off! Once the lid is off, all the appearances start to appear everywhere like fireworks in the sky. However, if we've gained familiarity with open intelligence, this won't be a problem for us. When all the negative data arise, we can rely on open intelligence for short moments, repeatedly, until it becomes continuous. This is the pivotal instruction.

**Q:** *I recognize that most people either have a very fearful relationship with death or they choose to ignore it as best they can, but I know in my own life that I want to understand that death is very much a part of life. Can you give some more down-to-earth examples so I can follow what you're saying?*

**A:** There are many examples for what I am speaking about. For instance, I am always amazed at how many people come out here to the seaside and buy a house right on the edge of an eroding cliff! Haven't they seen that the cliff is gradually being worn away and that eventually their house may fall into the ocean? They seem to feel that they are somehow outside of the processes of nature.

When we're at complete ease within ourselves, we know that we are part of nature. We can look at a house on the edge of an eroding cliff and go, "Ah ha, that eroding cliff is just like me; I am eroding every moment too. That house on the cliff isn't going to be there long, and neither will I!" When we are able to greet all the unthinkable things like death and destruction with ease, then we feel totally comfortable and at ease with ourselves, and we feel like this with everyone else, too. We just fit into nature and into the all-together, and we don't feel any separation from anything.

How about the flowers in the garden? The reason we love flowers is because they're a beautiful reflection of who we are. Coming out of a rich, vigorous emptiness, we're like seeds that sprout, go through their stages of growth and flowering glory, then gradually age, rot, are composted and then disappear into the earth again. This is what sparks our interests in the flowers we enjoy—they're a

precise reflection of ourselves. We don't cling to the rose and say, "Please don't go. I can't stand it if you leave me!" We know that the rose will fade and die, and this is just the way it is for the rose and for us.

All the thoughts that appear and events that occur happen as naturally as the flowers in the garden. They're like a shooting star in the night sky and are their own undoing. Nothing can be done to either encourage or prevent them. Even if we really love certain people very much, someday we'll leave them behind—either we'll die or they'll die. When we are entirely at ease, then that completely restful nature of our own being will be naturally present no matter what's going on—whether we're with the people we love or the animals we love or the flowers we love.

I have one final story that may help give us quite a different perspective. There was once a very great teacher who was teaching, among other things, that one had to leave the world, live in a cave and sit in meditative absorption for many years in order to realize the ultimate.

At some point, though, he said to himself, "This isn't it." This great man saw that the ultimate was not something to be acquired, but something that was ever-present and that there was no destination and no one going there. He was able to go far beyond what he had previously taught, and he escaped from the cage of his philosophy.

As he was dying he was completely at ease, and he was able to say, "My delight in death is far, far greater than the delight of traders at making vast fortunes at sea or those who are proud of their victory in battle or of those sages who have entered the rapture of perfect absorption. So, just as a traveller who sets out on the road when it is time, I will not remain in this world any longer, but will go to dwell in the stronghold of the great bliss of deathlessness." Now, that is certainly a beautiful and comforting perspective about death!