

Jeanne Corrigan

*Closer Than We Think: Gentle Reflections on Death*

Week Three: "Supporting Others in the Transition of Death"

October 15, 2022



Friends, in this part of the talk, I'd like to offer some reflections on how we can support others in this transition of death. The first is to be centered in yourself, grounded. Right now, let's settle again into the sense of the body, the weight of the body on the chair, the feet on the earth. Just let yourself rest there as best you can.

The second practice I'd like to offer are two questions that I like to have with me that could help connect with the person and their experience. Sometimes it's OK to just be there with your presence, but I also like to have these questions. They were given to me by a good friend who has helped many people in this transition. The first question is simply: *How is it for you now?* As I say that question, I can feel all of the love and care of my friend. That question is very different from "How are you doing?" "How is it for you now?" gives the person the invitation to go as deeply as they want or in any direction that they want with that question.

The second question is: *How can I help?* This gives the person in that transition time the capacity to give you direction, the choice and autonomy of asking you for help. Rather than saying, "I will do this, and I'll do that," "How can I help?" If a person can't talk, I have learned that it's OK to tell them what you're going to do or what you're there with in your heart. I might say, "I'm going to take your hand, just hold your hand, and I'm just going to sit here with you in love." That has been a very helpful thing to say for me.

I often get asked what to do in a case where our loved one may have dementia or Alzheimer's. How do we support them then? The most important thing that I can say about that is that if the stories are repetitive and perhaps not connected completely to reality, that's not important. What's really important is simply the love that you're there with and bringing love to every repeated interaction, your presence to every repeated story, just tuning into the love and care that's underneath the words.

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Another practice that's been helpful for me with friends who aren't in the immediate transition is to share my deathbed vision with them and ask them for theirs and do some planning ahead of time so that I know how I can support them and they know how they can support me. Are there chants or poems or readings or teachings or practicing the divine abodes, the practices of kindness or metta or compassion or quiet joy or equanimity? What practices would they like or would you like to be supported in at that time?

The suttas are full of ways that the Buddha supported people in this time. One of the suttas speaks about Assaji and the way the Buddha helped him on his deathbed. He helped him to remember his goodness, his *sila*. This is a really important practice for us: to remember our goodness. We can help someone remember their goodness throughout their life, and we can also help ourselves by remembering our goodness. This is a daily practice. This is a practice that the Buddha recommended to those of us who are householders in a sutta. He invited Mahanama to reflect on his virtue in every activity that he does. He said “Mahanama, develop the recollection of your virtue while you are walking, while you are standing, while you are sitting, while you are lying down, while you are busy at work, while you are resting in your home crowded with children. Remember your virtue in every activity.”

This is not an egotistical remembering; it's a remembering of the wholesomeness of our harmonious relations. It's so important. The Buddha says in this sutta why it's important. He says, “When a practitioner is recollecting their virtue, their mind is not overcome with clinging. Their mind is not overcome with aversion and not overcome with delusion. At these moments, one can gain a sense of the goal, gain a sense of the dharma, gain joy connected with the dharma. In one who is joyful, rapture arises. In one who is rapturous, the body grows calm. One whose body is calm experiences ease, and in one at ease, the mind becomes concentrated.”

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I want to offer this practice of remembering our goodness as a practice now and as a preparation for our deathbed. In another sutta, the Buddha helped the householder Anathapindika let go. He helped him with all kinds of practices of letting go.

I want to offer one more practice that I would like to have at my deathbed, and this is a song that comes from the Threshold Singers. The Threshold Singers are a choir whose purpose is to sing at the deathbed songs of support. This particular song I’m going to sing is called “Pure Grace” by Marty Marriott. I was at a deathbed once where the Threshold Singers came to sing, and I was so moved. We had a Threshold Singer in our death awareness group that we held in our sangha last year, and she sang to us at many of our gatherings, and it was so beautiful. I’m going to offer this song, and then we’ll have some moments of quiet afterwards.

Lay down your body, let go. Lay down your body, let go.

You are pure love now; you are pure grace.

Lay down your body, let go. Lay down your body, let go.

You are pure love now; you are pure grace. Lay down your body, let go.

Thank you, friends.