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The Reign of Death Over Society

All that we perceive is altered by our beliefs, but both those perceptions and beliefs are influenced by the conditioning of our minds by society. We have developed a fear of death and the ideas associated with it, including the belief that death is bad. Yet it is us as individuals – whom constitute society – that determine the notions of what death is and is not. Thereby, we perpetuate a life of fear due to our formulation of death, limiting our potential and happiness.

In perceiving what is and what is not, we develop a lens for interpreting actions, behaviors, and meanings. The lens filters our perceptions based on our conditioning of society’s so-called norms. It extends to our association of ideas with words, since words are simply symbols that man has made to represent those same ideas. Ideas which are influenced by the fact that man “experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest,” we are unable to completely understand perspectives other than our own (Rinpoche 169). Society trains us to believe that there are norms. Yet, how can we understand what norms are if we know nothing different than our individual selves? The idea of norms – in reference to actions, or personalities, or beliefs – is “a kind of optical delusion of consciousness” (Rinpoche 169). We believe in the ideas of norms, norms are not factual; we can only determine what is normal according to one’s self and in reference to one’s self combined with society’s influence on our selves since birth. Oddly, it is our belief in these norms, as perpetuated by society that is a failure to recognize our individuality within society. Furthermore, these ideas that we so strongly hold to become “a kind of prison” (Rinpoche 169). We are limited by our own ideas, ideas that are limited by society’s influence, ensuring that we are only able to embody a few of the infinite possibilities. We can believe anything we want to believe, it is our choice, although we let society tell us otherwise.

We are our ideas. We believe we are human, we believe we are creators, we believe we are lovers. But do we know what we know? Is it factual that we are these things? Sogyal Rinpoche suggests we are afraid of death “because we do not know who we are… [I]dentity depends entirely on an endless collection of things to prop it up” (Rinpoche 39). We are reliant upon “[those props’] fragile and transient support… for our security” (Rinpoche 39). We simply embody those ideas that we have associated with the words that we created. We believe we are, we do not know we are. Without these props, we lose our sense of security because we do not know how to identify ourselves – and society has become so attached to identities. “The formation of the human character, is a study in human self-limitation and in the terrifying costs of that limitation.” (Becker 96) That terrifying cost is the idea of death. In death, we are afraid to become nothing. Yet, just as we conceive the notions of death in our minds, we too make up our own identities and all that is associated with them, so when we experience what we think is death, we aren’t losing much, because ideas don’t die. With this comes a distinction that needs to be made – the distinction between knowing and believing, and humans have this tendency to confuse the former with the latter. We do not even know who we are ourselves, rather we are what we believe in; “[w]e see the world through our idea of who we think we are. Our model of the universe is based on our model of ourselves” (Levine 53). How we perceive society and the ideas of society are based on how we perceive ourselves. This perpetuates an infinite cycle since society, in turn, determines how we perceive ourselves.

This notion is examined in *No Death, No Fear,* when he comes to the realization after his mother’s death, that losing his mother “was just an idea. It was obvious… that [his] mother [was] always with him” (Hanh 6). She was a being, but she was also an idea – an idea that was comfort, support, kindness. All these ideas are manifested by society – what it means to be comforting, and supportive, and kind. According to the Buddha, “birth and death are notions. They are not real. The fact that we think they are true makes a powerful illusion that causes our suffering” (Hanh 4). We don’t know that there is life and death; one day there is breathing and the next there is not, but life and death are terms that we have invented. These are ideas that we have generally come to agree upon and associate with those terms. Our ideas of life and death are just notions that we have manifested in our minds – ideas that we should be healthy, that we should be happy, that we should love and be loved. These ‘should’s’ are actually ‘want to’s’ – our desires have become so strong that we have come to address them as a necessity of life. Conversely, it is when we lack these that we conclude that we are not living. Yet, it is simply that we are not embodying the ideas we have attached to the term “life.”

In life, we attempt to find meaning, to the point where we determine whether a life has been a good one if that person had a meaningful life. “Man cannot endure his own littleness unless he can translate it into meaningfulness on the largest possible level” (Becker 290). We strive for meaning, as if it is a feasible item, just so we can claim that we have lived a good life. And we struggle in our journey for that meaning, resulting in guilt from the sense of an “unused life, from the unlived in us” (Becker 268). Yet, it is the individual that determines meaning and value, just as the individual determines the self through ideas. And so we feel guilty for not living and we search even harder for a way to live, when it is within us all along; if we make up our identities, and we associate ideas with the terms life and death, then the individual can decide what it means to live. We strive to find a way to live the life that is idealized by society. But it is all made, and we are unable to achieve that sense of meaning or fulfillment because we are searching for the meaning designated by society rather than by one’s self. There is no rule that ideas of happiness and love are necessary, and there is no rule book written about life that is handed to us when we are born. Even if it were, who is it that determines a punishment to execute upon the rule breaker, as well as what that punishment is to be? We have come to believe that it is unforgiveable to not live according to society’s ideals. This struggle to find a meaning is only perpetuated by our increasing sense of the onset of death as we age and continue through life – an increasingly urgent sense of our notion of a diminishing amount of time to find that meaning. And so, our desire to find meaning is a constituent of our fear of death; we do not want death to come before we find that meaning.

As mentioned earlier, we are the creators of ideas. We tend to do this based on there being an opposite, and since we only know life, our attachment to it initiates a fear of its opposing force – death. And so our inclination to think of death as bad is due to the conflict presented by opposites, and humanity’s propensity to think in crude dichotomies. As we know life, and we designate life as good, death must then be bad because it is the opposite of life – or so our perception leads us to believe. And – being that life and death are simply ideas that we establish, we ironically initiate and perpetuate our own fear of death. Ernest Becker mentions that “the irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive” (Becker 117). Furthermore, as a consequence of our creation of the ideas of life and death, our self-infliction of the fear of death results in our inability to achieve true happiness; “[a]s long as fear is in us, happiness cannot be perfect” (Hanh 63). Therefore, we are preventing ourselves from being perfectly happy. But if we are able to realize that we cannot die, because the ideas that constitute us cannot die, we have an opportunity to achieve that perfect state of happiness; "[w]hen we understand that we cannot be destroyed, we are liberated from fear" (Hanh 5).It is when we are able to develop that understanding that we are able to be free from this fear of death, and then can be truly happy since that fear inhibits happiness.

In symbols, and meaning, and beliefs, we create our own ideas, determining who we are. And as these entities are influenced by society, society consequently determines who we are, restricting us to this cycle of conditioning. In reference to death, we think we know it, when – because we have not experienced it – what we think we know is actually just beliefs from which the basis of our fear of death forms. This unstable foundation for our fear results in limitation of our potential, and the inability to attain true happiness. In order to break from these constraints, we must understand that we consist of ideas and we can determine what those ideas are, rather than society determining them for us.

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