

Living the Question of Life: An Interview with Rodney Smith by Victoria Jean Dimidjian

Sometimes life gifts us.

Sometimes at crucial moments in our lives we are presented with new paths, opportunities to grow in ways we never expected. If we have courage to take these new directions, we expand, becoming more than we ever dreamed we might become, discovering ways to live and to die with dignity, with grace. That is the story of Rodney Smith's life journey as he told it to me one sunny December day in Seattle recently. His story is about his 16 years in hospice care, his 20 years of teaching Insight Meditation, and his 30 years of being a Buddhist practitioner. He says in summary of these years, "It comes down to living each moment as a question, and never taking anything for granted."

Rodney Smith was raised in Ohio just over 56 years ago, and he remembers his childhood as quiet, stable, "really just a non-event in those quiet Fifties." He was drafted during the Viet Nam war and worked as a medic in a hospital in Belgium. On returning to Ohio, he debated whether to attend medical school deciding instead on graduate training in social work. After graduate school came an "increasing despair of what life had to offer and an inner restlessness of spirit."

A spiritual direction suddenly opened when he went to hear Ram Dass speak in Cincinnati one cold winter evening. "Then I read *Be Here Now*, and connected with the spirit of it so deeply I couldn't do anything else but practice. Very quickly I discovered another dimension of living. I became a vegetarian, a rigorous meditator, and soon afterward, a long term student at the Insight Meditation Society (I.M.S.) in Barre, Massachusetts. I knew this would lead to inward stability and sanity but perhaps more importantly, it would set a course for questioning who I was inwardly."

For the next 3 1/2 years Rodney practiced and worked at I.M.S. It was there in 1979 he met the Burmese monk, Mahasi Sayadaw. Inspired, he followed Mahasi Sayadaw back to Burma and became an ordained monk. Later he moved to Thailand for further practice under Ajahn Buddhadasa. After four years the monastic phase of

his practice was over and he returned to the U.S. Reflecting on this time he says, "Part of me felt dry and untouched by those years of solitude. I felt I needed a more actively involved life with others, more social engagement. In the forest, in silence, I could avoid the abrasive quality of other people until I realized that inward growth meant moving towards the difficult. I didn't know precisely what I needed to learn but I knew it had to include other people."

Around this time Rodney read Stephen Levine's, *Who Dies?* Suddenly he sensed the direction of his work would be with the dying. "It had an immediate impact upon me, and I'm still not sure where that came from. Many people work with the dying as result of grief issues. I had lost both my parents during my twenties and thirties, but I think Stephen helped me see how death and loss are a pathway for spiritual growth. I was both fascinated and frightened by the prospect."

Returning to the West, Rodney spoke with Ram Dass about his desire to work with the dying. Soon he was on the road to interview for a hospice job in Texas. For 16 years he worked in hospice settings in Texas, Massachusetts, and Seattle. Half of that time has been delivering direct service to those at the end of life; the other half has been as administrator and teacher of hospice staff. In 1998 Rodney's book *Lessons from the Dying* was published. Today he works as founding and guiding teacher of the Seattle Insight Meditation Society, consultant to hospice programs, and spiritual counselor and meditation teacher to many.

A Buddhist Working with the Dying

VJD: Rodney, I'd like to begin our conversation here by asking how you have combined Buddhism and your work with the dying since your book is more focused on your actual work with people facing the end of life and your teaching is focused on helping those working on spiritual practice. Yet death is a central issue in both, isn't it?

RS: Death is still a mystery. The more I work with the dying, the more life contains that mystery as well. I became involved with the dying to further my spiritual growth. Death and dying simply wake me up. Dying forces me to ask questions and search for conscious ways to live.

VJD: It sounds like Buddhism, like the tenets of the practice.

RS: They are two separate arenas of my life, but in many ways they are the same. Working in my first hospice I felt like I'd never left the Buddhist monastery. The hospice staff didn't know a thing about Buddhism, but I could see we were facing the fears of a lifetime in this venture as we were in meditation. If I could stand the heat, I knew that the fires of death and dying could reveal eternal truths. At the monastery my mind had been sharpened and I had learned to move towards the difficult, and now I had the subject--death and dying--to focus my mind and pursue the inquiry. And death and dying began to reveal its secrets. I cannot tell you what death actually is to this day, but I can tell you all the excuses I put between myself and acknowledging the fact of my death. To take the subject on means it takes you on. It reveals all the ways we resist, rationalize, and distort life because we live constrained in time."

VJD: In trying to deny the fear, we avoid facing the fact?

RS: I must say that after all these years of hospice care, the subject of death and dying still remains as much a mystery to me now as it did then, in those first months of hospice work. But that's the point, isn't it? That it defies an explanation, it defies a determinant sentence. It allows the continuing questioning, the ever-open question of what is the unknown, what is it like to grow old and die, what is it like to age, and ultimately, who am I, when I can be here one moment and not the next. I am not interested in covering this question over by adding a Christian or Buddhist belief. The belief of heaven or reincarnation will make me feel safer but in doing so it eliminates the questioning.

VJD: So you live it consciously?

RS: You live it consciously, you live it actively, you live the open question of death. We access the true spirit of Buddhism by living the question of life. When we know too much about life it closes down to just what we know. We open it back up to its inherent wonder by holding it as a question.

Buddhism Opens the Way to Live with Dying

VJD: Let's explore that further. It sounds like you were learning from working with the dying, but you were learning even more inside yourself. Was the growth coming from learning how to engage with the dying as well as working internally with the subject?

RS: This is an important point. When we start getting involved with Buddhism, we start to work on what constrains your consciousness, what restricts it. Fear and resistance keeps us within the prison of our known universe. When we start to explore how fear controls us and what it really is, inevitably it is going to lead to areas like death where we are most timid. It is harder to maintain your fear and denial of death sitting in front of someone who is coughing up blood. So external contacts work on the inward investigation of fear and our inward growth then affects the outer situation. For example, as I became more comfortable with my dying often the patient would relax a little more with their situation as well.

When I came back from my "Buddhist years" in the East, I wanted to talk about what was important, death being one of those topics. So I found people who were willing to speak about these taboo subjects. And that is the real spirit of the sangha, a place to go outside the social norms and discuss what really matters.

VJD: Did you have that in Texas?

RS: No, not in general, but I had it with the staff of the hospice.

VJD: But how, I mean... the hospice-- (My puzzlement provokes his small smile)

RS: Oh, for the most part hospice staff do not understand Buddhist terms but they can look at death and dying and see it as an unknown, a constant question. And when you orient yourself to an unknown, you orient yourself to Buddhism. One of death's effects on Hospice staff is they understand the urgency of life. Buddhism provides the tools and methods to transform the practitioner. But without the urgency the effort toward transformation is often weak, and without the methods of how to transform the urgency can become misplaced. One feeds the other. Buddhism needs the urgency and hospice the stability and clarity found within the meditation.

You have to learn to let go in hospice care to survive more than a few months. When your hand releases its grip ever so slightly, joy and aliveness flow through the fingers. A kind of mystery begins to unfold. At first this can be unsettling, but over time the resistance can turn to joy. Hospices are not dour places. Joy becomes its own reward. If joy is to be known fully, all the defenses we usually place between ourselves and the unknown must go. Hospice staff either begin to relish the unknown or, more often, fall into habitual patterns while working with it. One awakens the other deadens. So Hospice folk could use more of the methods of self-discovery contained in Buddhism. With the right methods they remain just a tweak away from the spiritual growth that Buddhism addresses routinely. The two worlds fit together nicely for that very reason.

VJD: And over these years, Rodney, you've seen increasing integration of Eastern ideas and approaches, not just in work with the dying but in all the human sciences?

RS: Yes, (nodding deeply and setting aside his empty tea cup), oh yes.

I think the East offers both a way to appreciate and allow one's inward life, and a way to relate to people in pain with compassion. For the most part these are missing in our Western psychology and social work. It's very important to understand that our internal life of thoughts and emotions are not to be feared or altered. When understood properly, our internal states are not threatening. There is a way of working with anger for instance that is not turned inward as self-negation nor outward as other blaming. Awareness allows anger--or fear, impatience, loneliness, neediness--whatever emotions arise—to have legitimacy. Typically the West doesn't give them impartiality. I like to frame it in terms of aliveness. All aspects of our consciousness are components of what it means to be alive. To be fully alive means we honor and allow all aspects of our consciousness to be just as they are without internal judgment. We live as an open field, not a closed container. We can then learn to honor our inward life, not live at its expense--

VJD: To censor it, you mean? Or to deny it?

RS: Censoring has the effect of limiting our ability to listen. When we censor we are only receptive to what we want to hear. Only through listening can we offer the

healing qualities of awareness, attention, and non-judgment. Once we are able to allow and understand our own pain, we can then attend to the pain of others. Through uncensored awareness, I can create the same safe environment for others that I created inwardly with self-awareness. That makes it possible for me to genuinely meet people who need support in their pain. What people really seem to need is someone who has the courage to be present with them in their pain rather than trying to fix or solve the problem. To do that we provide the safe and gentle environment of just being together in awareness without censorship. This is the optimum environment for everyone's growth. You are not going to feel safe if I ridicule or inhibit your natural expression of life--

VJD: Yes, or disapprove or restrict it or--

RS: Or even flinch! If I give any indication that what you are expressing is off the mark, you aren't safe. But if I can hold an environment, create a space that allows you to come out without my aversion or annoyance or resistance, this is the environment of healing. But most of us are afraid to offer this safety because we are so disapproving of all forms and expressions of pain, most readily our own. I had a beautiful example of that in my hospice work. I was seeing a woman whose husband was dying. I had seen her for a number of sessions. One day I came to sit with her and took the same posture I'd always assumed with her, you know, a "kind of ready for your grief story now" with my hands on my knees, bending forward. She said, "You know, when you sit like that"--and she pointed to my hands on my knees--"you force me to grieve. And today I'm not ready to grieve. Today I'm angry as hell that he's dying. Are you going to be with me there too?"

VJD: And she trusted you enough to say that?

Rodney nods yes.

But we have so many prohibitions against intimacy, against saying what is true and meaningful. We don't tell people our needs, we don't like to ask for help.

RS: I think that the dying have a great deal to say about these prohibitions. When somebody is dying, the cultural niceties can't withstand the force and momentum of

the death. Death just clears the table of all of that. Dying forces us toward authenticity. Dying won't allow any pretension. We can't filibuster our way through death. Anything added is too much.

So if we look clearly at the moment of death and then we look at the moment of birth, we see the real human spirit. In between we just cover up our naturalness with the images we assume. I like to see the raw human being, to see what is really there. When people are able to be honest they recover themselves. When we're not, they cut themselves off from reality, from aliveness.

VJD: So you're talking about a psychology that is not only engaged but also fully present, in-the-moment, connected to the other in whatever state or feeling they are experiencing. Or whatever difficulty they are in.

RS: And that is love. When you are able to hold the pain of the other without aversive, true connectedness occurs. When I'm reacting to what you are saying because I can't hold your intense grief, I'm saying in effect, "I can't bear your grief, go on, get out of here, get over it." But if I can hold your grief without reactivity, you can grieve without my subtle pressures upon you. Then you can move within it as deeply as you want to go.

When I am connecting to your grief without any barriers, then true compassion can arise. It is always immediately available, but we are more focused on resisting the immediate pain. Resistance keeps me safely within my role and very well defined, but it does so at the sake of the intimacy between us.

VJD: Hearing you say this, Rodney, I think about teaching adults to work with children. You are describing what happens when adults aren't in touch with the two-year old inside so can't start to relate to the child crying at the door. Or the five-year old who can't cope with his fears. What is in the child is also here (pointing to my heart), you see?

RS: What we've done--in terms of a metaphor--is over a lifetime we have painted the raw wood of our true nature over and over again --layers upon layers. Spiritual practice is just stripping the wood back to its original condition. We usually take one layer off at a time because we are afraid of revealing too much. And that's the reason

the practice is hard. Because when you remove a layer of paint, the reasons that you put the paint on in the first place are exposed --all the pain associated with that time in your life when you needed a good coat of paint is exposed.

VJD: So it's a different kind of growth you are talking about, Rodney. Not really trying to change externally, but to go inside, to the root of yourself?

RS: Ultimately the intent of spiritual practice is not about changing a thing. We are not attempting to build a sharper, more defined sense of me. We go inside to learn what is already there and allow it full exposure without identifying it as me or mine. To strip it away means to let it be. And with each layer that we strip away, we come closer to being complete in aliveness, in presence.

As we begin to do this work, we find ourselves re-experiencing our historical patterns often in the form of charged memories and reactive emotions. Although unpleasant and often startling, their appearance indicates we are headed in the right direction. Death also strips the paint away. So when we look at death wherever we are unresolved in our emotional history that is what is going to come forth. Shame, inadequacy, unworthiness, it is all there just waiting for the right conditions to spring forth. And death provides those conditions by ending time. It's a universal truth. No paint can hide it. It's an absolute. You are going to be exposed when you die. I love absolutes because absolutes allow no pretension, nothing gets in the way. And when there is nothing between a human being and his/her death, there is a natural quality to the way he/she dies. They either float or sink with the conflict. If they can keep their head up and float, they will be changed forever. And therefore you see a few people approaching their death with an understanding that eluded them in life.

VJD: What you describe sounds like Jack Kornfield's stories of the many ways of dying which Zen roshis recount. At first this surprised me, hearing struggles and pain in these stories. You know, you think "Well, they should know how to do it!"

RS: We say, "Well, somebody who has practiced meditation, that person must know how to die." But somebody who has practiced meditation does not know how to die. How could they, it hasn't happened. They may know how to live in the raw quality of their humanness and that will serve them well when they do die. But what will

arise in the moment of their death will remain a mystery until that moment occurs. One person may smile their way through the process another may be in terror. There is no way to know. It just happens. It will be different for each one of us, and it may be very difficult indeed. The only preparation is to meet every experience throughout our life with open unpretentiousness, and then death will take care of itself.

There's a Zen story of the student coming to the roshi who has cancer and saying, "How are you going to be when you die?" And the Roshi started rolling on the floor and yelling in pain. Then he got back up, sat straight and looked the student in the eye to see if he understood. There wasn't any way to know. Our expectations are just added baggage. There is no room for anything extra. (Here Rodney gestured with his hands dismissively, then shrugged.)

Buddhist Practice, Buddhist Living

VJD: You have practiced meditation for most of your adult life. What is your practice like now, how is it part of who you are?

RS: It's more free-formed now. For many years I did rigorous sitting and endless retreating, and that practice was central to my spiritual unfolding. But in the past decade my practice has changed. The line between meditation and living has been erased. Meditation is more integrated into my life as a whole. A full living approach feels truer to me now. I simply relax and affirm whatever is happening. The less resistance the more spacious my consciousness. Awareness begins to touch areas of more subtlety, where I am still defined, resisting and fixed within an idea. The pain of resistance wakes me up from my tendency to slumber. Once I move into that area of resistance and allow it to be just as it is and be fully there in it, then it all starts flowing again. It was only the resistance that blocked awareness. Once resistance, pain, negativity, all the hard places are opened, then awareness flows in its natural state.

VJD: Would you have gotten to that place of understanding and acceptance without meditation?

RS: Speaking for me personally, I think not. No, I'm sure of that. But neither would this understanding have come without a close relationship to death. But that's not true for everyone, I know that's so. Each person has an individual readiness to awaken, and the themes that awaken a person are as varied as the population. Some are just more ready to awaken than others. Some people like me have very fixed minds and need hard subjects like death to penetrate their stubbornness.

VJD: And now the door is continually open?

RS: Awareness is always present for anyone who inquires into it. We just keep putting our individual agenda ahead of awakening. Personally I feel the process of awakening is both in time and out of time. We awaken beyond time constraints but most of us need time to integrate the leftover residue. We keep learning and releasing, learning and releasing deeper into the unknown.

VJD: And how do you do that? Is there a way you use to accomplish that each time?

RS: Not by applying a formula. And yet, there is a way of being wholly present and responding spontaneously as needed in the moment that feels authentic. There is a knowing that that is occurring.

VJD: Did that just evolve for you? Or how did it happen, do you think?

RS: It was a combination of my hospice work and the meditation practice. I found how to meet each person's needs in the moment by being in the moment. It cannot be an abstract connection. There is only one way to be creative and that is to let go.

For example, I had a patient who was dying of lung cancer. He was always short of breath and just terrified of the death facing him soon. Jack believed very literally in the Bible, and he felt he could not be afraid of dying because that denied the "living word of the book" that was central to his life. But I could see how filled with fear he was, how he was denying God by denying the fear he had when he was short of breath. So I just asked him, "So it's God's will that you are going to die?" And he agreed. Then I said, "So it seems that it's also his will that you are alive now." He agreed again. So I suggested that if he noticed his breath then he would in fact be

noticing God's intention for him to live right now. As he began to notice his breath, he could no longer deny the fear that arose with his dying. He began to work with his pain rather than deny its existence. We were not talking about spirituality and faith in some abstract way, but working directly with his suffering here and now.

VJD: You found the words that helped accept the pain, and then his need to control through denial was eased?

RS: He began to face what stood in the way between his religion and his death. You can't die a scriptural death. Dying makes life immediately real. It invalidates the dogma and validates the human being.

Releasing Control, Embracing the Passage

VJD: It reminds me again of the question of caring for children, how we ask them for such control and how we try to control so much of their development, sometimes forcing growth rather than facilitating it.

RS: Control breaks down during dying. If your character has a strong need to control, the pattern will continue while you are dying. And the dying process will show you the limitations of what you can influence. Fear can arise from seeing this. Real panic. It's not too small a word. For many people the loss of control is the loss of their self-identity. Death can sometimes be easier for people who have lived on the fringes of life because their lives have always been out of their control. But for people of affluence and influence, prestige and status, this is usually the critical moment of their process. Will they struggle on or surrender to something much greater. So the difficulty challenges of our life can often work towards our advantage when we are dying if we have used them to see our limitations.

VJD: You told some wonderful stories in *Lessons from the Dying* showing this contrast, Rodney. I remember the woman who had holes in her floor but such an open heart during her last days, and then the other woman who lived in a home of exquisite beauty but couldn't allow anyone to help her die.

RS: When we no longer can use our body in familiar ways or meet our own bodily needs, we are on the edge of being out of control. We become helpless like a little child. That's a very tender edge. But even within this helplessness the person can still feel like a whole in their aliveness. We can still access the fact we are complete. That sense of completeness can follow us, even if our bodies lose functionality. Losing everything except the essence of who we are is an available lesson at the end of life. Everything moves away from us, our abilities, decision making, relationships, everything, except a wholeness of consciousness. There is that which does not change and then there is the ever changing forms and expressions of life. The appearances are all dying with the body. That leaves the essence intact.

VJD: And is that something that can be assisted in the dying process? This learning to turn inward in the meditative process presents some of that, doesn't it?

RS: An environment can be created to help with this process, yes. But often the loved ones supporting the dying person want to keep them linked to the living. So they put up pictures of the family, of the people they are leaving, instead of spiritual figures or visions of what may come during this passage. For a Christian this might mean taking down the picture of a daughter and putting up a picture of Christ. With the correct kind of re-framing, people who are being left behind don't keep pulling and tugging at the wardrobe of the one dying. They can start finding ways to facilitate the passage. The way we create an environment through music, through beauty, through going up to the loved one and saying, "You know, it's going to be hard for me, but it's going to be OK. I will work it out without you. I want you to have the best journey possible." That allows the dying to let go relationships and issues they haven't resolved, and move into the next dimension.

VJD: Yes, it is a question of learning, both for the dying but also for those left, how egos cope with this challenge.

RS: But the ego usually screams at its demise. Everything that has defined us is falling apart, everything is being taken away. We feel we are being dismantled as we die. And what does that mean? Ultimately it puts us into free fall. Now we have even moved beyond the issue of control. You're just in free fall, and have nothing to land on.

There is an overriding need for self-preservation, the first stage of dying. We begin to feel the actual effects of never being physically who we once were, and get very frightened by that prospect. We try to retreat back to what was familiar and regain our empowerment, but we can't. The "old me" is finished. We can either futilely attempt to regain control or acquiesce to the process and fall into the unknown. We can also approach these stages by simply looking at our death now and not wait until it actually occurs.

VJD: So you see definite stages in learning to accept death and to working with the dying?

RS: Yes, three at least. When we begin this journey into death, we struggle with our need for self-preservation. We want to learn from death but keep our life safe at the same time. September 11 showed us that so clearly. Remember how we were so overwhelmed, just broken apart by the tragedy. And our hearts opened, we knew we were all vulnerable, we knew we were all connected, and our hearts opened up to the care and help and grief. That's passed now, but for those first days we really were a difference community, maybe a different country. Then the defenses went up and the concern for self-preservation started to divide us.

VJD: And that's when retaliation, hatred took over?

RS: When we had stopped opening to the suffering, to the tragedy, the brute force or anger took over. We needed to respond to the terrorism but in moving with our anger we planted the seeds for endless suffering and retaliation. During those weeks one sangha I work with in Canada marched with a banner every week. The banner read, "Never through anger does anger cease, only through understanding." They took the time to try and understand what really happened rather than react.

If we can move beyond this need for self-preservation, then we come to the second stage, the comprehension of the universality of death. I mean, my God, when you realize that everything I touch, that all of the people in my life, all of it is going to die, they are, it is, I am, whatever happens, death will finally intercede. So what is my relationship to the world given that fact?

VJD: Yes, given the impermanence of all life--

RS: Embracing impermanence fully, accepting it totally. This is not an easy process. In fact it reshuffles the deck. When this is fully understood awareness releases itself from all appearances, all forms and experiences because there is the realization that which changes is not the final answer. And then the final stage arises. Given the fact that I am dying and given the inevitable ego-disintegration in death, the final call is toward self-exploration and the understanding of the eternal. The perennial question of who am I comes forth which brings us back full circle to the immediate moment. To the just this, just what is, no pretense, just presence, just being.

VJD: So it makes sense that all of the religious traditions view death as central.

RS: I think Christ was toying with our understanding when he brought the dead to life. He was saying it's not about dying or not dying. It's about that which doesn't change, not that which does. The miracles were his attempt to show that all this is of minor importance, just a play of different conditions. We lose ourselves within the appearances. Like an image on a photograph, we see only the image, not the paper it is printed on. To see through these appearances into the Truth that eternally waits is the final stage of our inquiry into death. Death shows us that because it takes the world away. In that moment it's gone, Whoosh!

That's why everybody sees the light. You take everything away what else is there? I think in that moment we will all see the light!

VJD: Your words, Rodney, make me wonder what you think about your own death, about what a good death would be for you.

RS: Ahhh, I'll have to give you two answers to that. The conventional one and the personal one.

The first is based mostly on my years in hospice work, and the second from meditation. Personally I don't think in that way. I think any situation is workable, and as long as it is workable I can be with it, learn from it. I don't think I need certain props or certain conditions. If I am dependent on the conditions of an expected

death, what happens if I have a heart attack out on the freeway? If my preconditions aren't met, is death going to be bad? This is the issue with what we now call "a dignified death." But dignity to me is not what the body's abilities are. Not whether the body can care for itself or is secreting fluids all over the bed. That isn't the basis of dignity. Dignity is how I hold the situation inside regardless of what is occurring. It is the inward dignity that will define a good death for me. But I know there are many situations where I may not hold this kind of dignity. I may be screaming inside, I may be lost, it may be a tremendously difficult event. But the point is that the possibility or potential for a good death is always there. Whether I am up to the task isn't really the point. Death holds the potential. Death always holds the possibility of growth.

VJD: You're saying that dying is still part of living and learning, still part of coming to know the dharma?

RS: How could it be otherwise? I think it will be an exciting part. Conventionally a good death is understood in terms of whether you are dying in the place you want to die, most frequently the home. And whether the people you want around you are there or not. And hospice is the driving force for the establishment of that conventional definition of a good death. It holds a lot of merit. It's where people are most relaxed, where they feel most in control. And that is very important when they feel they are losing control in relation to everything else. But to be honest, hospices can create the environment but then old family patterns can come back in and break it apart. Often it's about complaining and bickering, the old family dynamics. So families die in character too just as Elizabeth Kubler-Ross said people do.

VJD: Let me see if I can put this in my words, Rodney. What you are saying is that you want to go beyond the splitting of good death/bad death. You see the embracing of the process of dying regardless of conditions, making it more possible to move into the process--

RS: Exactly!

VJD: --So whether death is in a hospice or on the freeway, you will be able to answer, to open to the situation when the time comes.

RS: And that is my definition of a good death.

VJD: It seems very rooted in Buddhism.

RS: Central to the practice, yes. But.. (he paused a long moment here)

But I do think the establishment of a conventional definition of "a good death" is very important. Dialoguing about what is a good death is a cultural movement towards greater sensitivity of heart and the beginning of the end of denial of death. I think the creation of the framework of a good death--environment, medication, financing, all of it--is very important in bringing the whole culture to the recognition of the potential of that event.

VJD: Yes, otherwise what we said earlier could mean that externally we don't need to do anything, that death can come however, whenever, and we just need to be ready.

RS: Some could say there's no need for hospices, no reason to fund support for the dying, so then nobody does anything. That takes us backward, and leaves us with nothing. So, you see, hospice supports the capacity for my individual definition of the good death. I could live without it if I had to, but I hope everyone has a chance to experience their good death.

Choosing Hospice Support on the End-of-Life Journey

VJD: Rodney, your experiences working in hospice have convinced you of its importance. What would you say to someone just starting to think about this decision. Why hospice rather than institutional care or just staying at home with family?

RS: Oh, several reasons, at least four come to mind!

First, patients can relax during their final journey at home. Most would readily choose this environment except they have no experience and knowledge to handle

the physical and medical problems that emerge at the end of life. So they go to institutional settings where they think such problems can better be handled. But of course hospice provides the resources to die at home. Hospice says to the patient, "You stay here and we will manage your worries. We will be here to manage the symptoms and solve the medical/physical problems during this passage.'

Second, hospice looks at the patient and family as a unit of care. Few institutions provide that range of support. Usually dying is seen as an individual problem, and the medical focus is on alleviating symptoms and pain for the patient. Hospice views death holistically including the family within the process. Both patient and family members are engaged, and their psychosocial, spiritual and physical needs are supported during the transition. And then after the patient's death, hospices continue supporting the grieving period.

Third, hospice provides resources to families in their homes to make end-of-life affordable, so the families do not have to deplete their savings. Hospice has their unique knowledge and skill to train and support the family during each step of the dying process.

But, you know, I think the most important thing hospice can do, and the reason I would turn to it during my dying, is that help is available to the patient and family at any time, day or night, just a phone call away. Not like having to schedule an "emergency admission" or get a doctor through the answering service. Hospice staff have immediate experience and responsive help right there. They say, "We've been through this before, we know how to work with the end of life, and here is what we can help with right now." Since this is their only focus of care, hospices have learned to anticipate the need and respond quickly and clearly.

VJD: So the hospice approach is a constantly-open-door link to the family and its dying member?

RS: Too often the dying are silenced and their concerns and questions are inhibited, even prohibited. You know, doctors know best and the hospital will take care of everything, that kind of mentality pervades our health care delivery. But terminal illness and dying really are different, and hospice takes a radically different stance

with each. One that works in partnership with the family and patient, helping with each step, responding to each struggle.

Looking Ahead as We Conclude this Conversation

VJD: Rodney, what you are working on today, during this long wet winter in the Northwest?

RS: I'm formulating a book on lay Buddhism. At the core of it will be how to structure our life so that we are continually being spiritually fed. I think my Buddhist tradition is too firmly planted in the retreat mentality and has not yet spent sufficient time developing the tools for lay life and how to fully use lay life towards awakening. We have to be able to deal with the rubs of life without excuses, so that every event is a doorway to the beyond.

VJD: The work of our egos coping?

RS: Dealing with the rubs of life, is dealing with the sense of self. Where we struggle is where we are defined. To look at conflict is to understand the sense of me. Ultimately the resolve to end struggle must direct us towards our death. This is the call; this is the call of spiritual growth. It need not wait until we have metastatic cancer with weeks to live. This is the call of immediacy.

VJD: And so the fact that every person loses someone beloved and everyone has to have death in some way within their consciousness, every person has some kind of suffering. It might be physical suffering or emotional or social or economic, but there's always some kind of suffering. So all of those things-- from the end of life to what you call the little rubs of life--all those things can be ways to learn to be with the situation, with life.

RS: Death gives us the lessons for living, the materials for meeting each moment fully and openly. With we keep our death close, we remain in touch with how to live? With death we have no more time. No more time to procrastinate, no more endless tomorrows. Time comes screeching to a halt, and suddenly the heart opens. Why does the heart open when time isn't there? Thinking in terms of time, living in

terms of time is the very blockage of the heart. The future obscures reality. All the yesterdays we carry with us in terms of our past, our shame, our guilt act as blinders to what is immediately present. All our expectations, our plans, all that prohibits us from being present, being fully engaged here and now. We have to actualize that engagement. Mostly we don't. We work with it mentally, our minds engaged but our hearts remain in abeyance. Death gives us hope, it doesn't take it away. Death gives us the opportunity to live life, every moment of it, knowing life and death merge in union if only we can get out of the way. Opening the heart, fully engaged in living, that is the way of living and dying.

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