

6 *Memento Mori*: The Buddhist Thinks about Death

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Recently I had an interesting chat with a gentleman from a local mortuary establishment who wanted me to buy a prepaid burial plan, so that my family would be spared all the trouble when the time came. Better yet, there was a guarantee that the cost would never increase beyond what I had prepaid. This is surely a prudent way to prepare for the end. I did not buy the plan, but I did become fascinated with the salesman's talk. I listened for well over half an hour and not once did the words 'die' or 'death' pass his lips. I could not resist calling this to the man's attention and he confessed that such language depressed people. I suspect that the corollary was that it would be bad for sales. But here was a man who tried hard for almost an hour to get me to buy a plan that involved embalming expenses, caskets, and burial services, and never did he refer to a corpse, embalming, death, or burial. Rather, when I 'passed on', the 'remains' would be 'prepared' and 'interred'. The lucky remains would, however, never get caught in an inflationary spiralling of costs, and survivors would not even have to decide what suit the remains would wear throughout eternity.

The salesman reflected beautifully a widespread conspiracy of silence and evasion where death is concerned. A colourful array of euphemisms, from 'passing on' to the 'buying the farm' made popular in the Vietnam War, attempt to soften the blow of death. They allow us to talk circumspectfully and delicately about what is in effect a taboo subject. Even religion, sex, and politics are sometimes permissible in polite conversation but not 'It'. We in effect deny it exists by not permitting ourselves to think of it, as Heidegger showed so cogently. We in turn justify our evasions by relegating any frank discussion to the inadmissible category of the morbid. And morbid people are no fun to be with. Yet it is, as Heidegger points out, the most possible of all our possibilities.

