Bringing Spiritual Death to life.

In ‘Initiation into a new life’ Subhuti lays out Sangharakshita’s system of spiritual life. In his introduction to the article Sangharakshita himself wrote: *“I urge you all to apply this system fully and deeply to yourselves (...). If each of us does work diligently on ourselves in this way, then everything else will follow.”*

We are at an important juncture in our history as an Order, and it seems to me that a number of threads are emerging together and in a somewhat fascinating synchronisity. One of these is the move into a more explicit exploration of vipashyana, a serious dedication to establishing ourselves in the stage of Spiritual Death, and a willingness to talk about what that really means and our own exploration of it.

It’s probably true to say that recently some of our communication around our own experience of vipashyana has been somewhat clumsy. I think that's understandable given that as a community it's not something we have done very much of. I guess we needed to start somewhere. However, we have actually been given a very useful way of talking about spiritual experience, which if we are willing to use it I think lends real clarity and directness to our explorations. It offers us a shared language and perspective on the Dharma life, and preserves and uncovers the richness of the Dharma in its many facets. I think it also can help us to clarify the significance of traditional terms and markers in the spiritual life.

I’d like to share a few thoughts on the stage of Spiritual Death as taught in Sangharakshita’s system. The main points I try to make are that Spiritual Death needs to include all 5 aspects of this ‘system’, that we are best off keeping a balanced perspective on practice, and that doing so gives us a helpful way of approaching and talking about vipashyana. I also write a bit about the process of seeing the truth of anatta. I hope that it contributes to our exploration of the Triratna approach to the Dharma. I also hope that you don't find it too long and that my thoughts aren't too confused.

The Dharma life

Our Order’s collective approach to the Dharma comes from Sangharakshita. It reflects his perspective on the Buddhist tradition, and includes a wide range of teachings and practices – and an enormous amount of inspiration - focused around what he has identified as the essential elements of a life in the Dharma. To be a Triratna Buddhist implies, we might say, taking a mandala type approach to practice, within which all these essential elements or facets of the Dharma are kept alive, both in our own individual life and in our collective life as a community.

Recently we have been explicitly invited to think in terms of there being 5 essential aspects to the Dharma life, which need to be awakened and developed together: integration, positive emotion, spiritual receptivity, spiritual death and spiritual rebirth. It is through intensifying or unfolding these 5 aspects that the Dharma life is lived.

As Order members we are dedicated to the task of realizing the Dharma ever more fully and Sangharakshita also offers us a model for the Dharma life as consisting of a series of broad stages or fruits. We label these the stages of Integration, Positive Emotion, Spiritual Death and Spiritual Rebirth (I’ll use capitals to distinguish them from the aspects with the same names, as it can get confusing). Sometimes we add a fifth stage, that of No More Effort or Compassionate Activity.

In ‘Initiation into a new life’ Subhuti argues that the Dharma life is about increasingly overcoming ego or self-clinging. As he puts it, we are trying to allow Dharma niyama processes to become dominant, *“unfolding spontaneously through the individual who cooperates fully with them, overcoming successively more subtle depths of self-clinging”*. Overcoming self-clinging is a process, only fully realised with ‘full and perfect Enlightenment’.

No doubt there are a number of ways we can think about the Dharma life, but all of them will reflect a process of transformation around seeing clearly and for ourselves (vipashyana) 'the way things really are’ or 'the true nature of existence’, and especially seeing the truth of anatta, the illusory nature of a separate self. This direct seeing is essential to a genuine spiritual life.

A shifting constellation of aspects

So according to Sangharakshita’s approach, a true Dharma life is multi-faceted, and the task at any one time is to allow all the facets to open up and progress. The Triratna model is that of 5 facets or aspects moving through 5 stages – each stage is about establishing ourselves more fully in these 5 aspects, focused in a particular way.

In order to get a sense of the way in which these 5 aspects are focused in different ways as our Dharma life unfolds, it can be useful to think that at each stage of the spiritual life the corresponding aspect of the same name is central, with the other aspects forming a constellation around it.

So at the earliest stage, that of Integration, taking responsibility for oneself, self-awareness and mindfulness – i.e. the *aspect* of integration - are central. At the stage of Positive Emotion, developing maitri, ethics and skilful intention (the aspect of positive emotion) are central. At the stage of Spiritual Death it is seeing through the illusion of a separate self (spiritual death) that is central. At the stage of Spiritual Rebirth it is the dominance of Dharma Niyama processes that is central, or spiritual rebirth. And what takes us into and through each stage is spiritual receptivity, which perhaps we could say finds it’s own centrality in the stage of No More Effort.

The 5 aspects at the stage of Spiritual Death

The aspect of spiritual death, like the other aspects, is an essential part of the Dharma life and, as Subhuti explained in his paper, needs to be present at each and every stage of it. At the stage of Spiritual Death however it becomes the core aspect. Subhuti says of the stage of Spiritual Death that its focus *“is on seeing through our misunderstandings about the nature of reality itself, especially about who and what we ourselves are (…). Spiritual Death means seeing through our habitual delusions, our automatic misreadings of our experience.”* He puts this particularly in terms of the 4 viparyasas.

So central to the stage of Spiritual Death is seeing for oneself – clearly and directly - that the sense of ‘me’, or the belief in a separate self, is a construct and therefore an illusion. There is no separate entity that owns experience, or that lies behind, in or possesses the 5 skandhas.

However, though at each stage of the Dharma life there is a core aspect, it is important to remember that the suggestion from Sangharakshita’s system is that the other 4 aspects also need to be fully present. As Subhuti puts it, the 5 aspects *“can be seen as the principal elements of the Dharma life at all stages”.* So, if we are to really take seriously Sangharakshita’s system of Dharma life, then Spiritual Death needs to include the other 4 aspects. If not, it’s not really Spiritual Death. They need to be present as dimensions, expressions of and even *ways into* Spiritual Death. So the suggestion is that the stage of Spiritual Death is not just about seeing through the illusion of self, the spiritual death aspect, but that it is also about integration, positive emotion, spiritual receptivity and spiritual rebirth in relation to that insight. It is valid and useful to talk about this stage in these terms too, and to come at it through practices that work on these other aspects.

As **integration**, we could describe Spiritual Death as remembering that experience arises and disappears according to pratitya samutpada and the workings of karma. It is letting go of prapancha and being willing to come back to direct experience, mindful of whatever arises within experience as being characterised by the 3 laksanas and especially anatta. It is the on-going identification of things – specially oneself - as being touched by ‘reality’. As Sangharakshita puts it in ‘The way of emptiness’ (in Crossing the Stream): *“Constant mindfulness of emptiness is the secret of success in the spiritual life. (…) The remembrance of emptiness, far from decreasing one’s power of spiritual activity, increases it enormously. It becomes easy, effortless, spontaneous, full of joy. Because the obstacle to activity, which is the self, has been removed.”* At the stage of Spiritual Death that mindfulness, that degree of integration around the way things really are, *is* Spiritual Death itself.

Likewise, the stage of Spiritual Death in its fullness is also experienced as **positive emotion**, or skilful intention. It can be usefully talked about in this way too and we can (even need to) come at it through the practice of positive emotions. Positive emotion at this stage becomes truly self-transcending. Though we see there is no actual existing ‘self’, we are still far from free from the workings of karma and need to continue to develop the ability and willingness to again and again, from moment to moment, let go of ego-clinging as it arises and manifests in the infinite forms of greed, hatred and delusion. It involves the practice of confession, openness to criticism and the letting go of defensiveness. It also of course involves contacting maitri and the other brahma viharas and acting from them, even serving them. Spiritual Death is not different from the practice of ethics and the ten precepts. It has to move into the actual business of living and become self-transcending in the sense of action that comes out of a sense of increasingly unbreakable empathy with ‘others’ - who we see are also empty of separate self. Again, here it is not that positive emotion is just supporting Spiritual Death, as a proceeding stage, but rather it is Spiritual Death itself. Again in Crossing the Stream (this time in ‘The problem of desire’) Sangharakshita wrote: *“It may, in fact, even be said that the criterion of our having truly understood the illusoriness of the ego-conception is whether or not we are able to feel for the sufferings of others that ‘painless sympathy with pain’ which is, according to Buddhist teaching, the natural and spontaneous outward expression of all true spiritual attainment. Freedom from desire consists not in marble-hearted insensitivity to human suffering but in that warm and ready response to it which only desirelessness – that is to say, unselfishness – is able to make. Only those who are truly desireless know how to love, and in universal love lies the secret of liberation.”*

And likewise **spiritual receptivity,** that sensitivity and openness to unfolding experience and consciousness that moves beyond self-clinging, is Spiritual Death too. Aesthetic appreciation, responsiveness to myth, archetype and beauty, ethical sensibility, conviction and faith, the awareness of and responsiveness to creative psycho-physical energies, awe and a sense of mystery come to displace self-clinging as the basic response to experience. Perhaps it is what Einstein was getting at when he spoke of ‘cosmic religious feeling’. For each of us the exact way in which spiritual receptivity develops will be distinct. With the falling away of self-view true individuality (in Sangharakshita’s use of the term) begins to shine forth. Spiritual Death is a heightened sensitivity to the moment-to-moment presence of pratitya samutpada - the constant flow of life - and of creative Karma niyama and Dharma niyama processes as they body forth in a particular and unique form.

And so Spiritual Death is also **spiritual rebirth** - the courage to live by and from emerging Dharma niyama processes which go beyond self-clinging, and which are felt as a living presence, so to speak. This also is Spiritual Death. It is an active bond with what is beyond self-clinging, experienced through the faculty of Imagination perhaps as the Buddha, the yidam, ‘other power’, the stream of the Dharma, the guru, Adhisthana, the Bodhicitta, the Creative Mind, Life itself - and who knows, for some perhaps even Christ, the Virgin or God – and which are all understood to be shunya.

Finally, as **spiritual death** itself, the stage of Spiritual Death means seeing directly and for ourselves the illusion of self, and not just once but coming back again and again to that direct, immediate perception of self as a construct. The initial moment of seeing needs to be not just remembered but re-lived so that understanding is able to flow directly from the mind and heart.

Some thoughts on seeing through the illusion of a separate self

The Buddhist tradition teaches that it is essentially belief in atta that sustains ‘ego-clinging’, the reactive mind, samsara. If we are to die to the illusory self, and overcome self-clinging, we must first really see that it is illusory. This seeing involves firstly identifying ‘self’, for as Shantideva says: *"When there is no perception of something falsely projected as existent, there is no understanding of the non-existence of that entity."*(Shantideva: A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life, 9.139.). Likewise Tsongkhapa assures us that *“In order to be certain of the meaning of 'selflessness', or 'the lack of intrinsic existence', you must carefully identify the self, or intrinsic nature, that does not exist. For, if you do not have a clear concept of the object to be negated, you will also not have accurate knowledge of its negation.”* (Tsongkhapa: Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path, vol.3, 2.10.). So they suggest that it is only on the basis of a clear identification of the belief in a separate ‘self’ that one is then able to look at exactly what it is (and what it is of course is just a construct of ideas, emotions, feelings and associated physical sensations that are mistakenly taken to constitute a separate entity, an ‘I’). This is not easy of course because being deluded, inevitably we end up trying to see ‘I’ from a sense of ‘I’ – we are caught in the ‘koan’ of an imaginary ‘I’ trying to see that ‘I’ is an illusion. The habitual falling into believing that we are a separate, self-existing entity continually slips around and behind our attempts to see it.

I think it’s important that we are clear that seeing through the illusion of an intrinsic self is not just a deeper intellectual understanding, yet nor is it some kind of ‘mystical’ state or higher meditative state. It is a direct perceiving which means we really know. It is vipashyana. We simply see directly and for ourselves the sense of, or belief in, an ‘I’ and that it is a construct.

Ayya Khemma talks about this in ‘Path and Fruit’, which you can find on the internet. She describes this seeing as a ‘path moment’ and as *“totally different from anything previously known.”* She goes on to say that such a moment *“is not comparable to the meditative absorptions (jhana). Although it is based upon them because only the concentrated mind can enter into a path moment, it does not have the same qualities. The meditative absorptions have -in their initial stages - the ingredients of rapture, happiness and peacefulness. Later on, the mind experiences expansion, nothingness and a change of perception. The path moment does not contain any of these states of mind. (…) While the meditative absorptions bring with them a feeling of oneness, of unity, the path moment does not even contain that. The moment of fruition, subsequent to the path moment, is the understood experience and results in a turned-around vision of existence.”*

So it is this “turned-around vision” that is the core of Spiritual Death, and of course traditionally it marks a major transition in the Dharma life.

The fact that it does traditionally have such weight means that as Buddhists we probably inevitably have a number of expectations about what seeing through the illusion of a separate self means, and what the consequences will be. This in itself I think can be a major obstacle. We get caught up in our own projections and in the traditional metaphors of Stream-Entry, Irreversibility, The Arising of the Bodhicitta, thinking (perhaps hoping) that seeing through self will transform us into some kind of super-being. *And* thinking that anyone who says they have seen through self must be claiming to be a super-being. Actually, seeing through atta just means seeing through atta. It means freeing ourselves of the wrong view, of the deep-rooted idea or belief, that there is an ‘I’ that is some kind of separate entity. As the teaching of the Ten Fetters shows, it doesn't mean uprooting greed and hatred, and it doesn't necessarily mean coursing in the dhyanas. And right view, the seeing of things as they really are, needs to be continuously reinforced and brought back into awareness, experienced again and again.

Nor does seeing through atta necessarily mean dwelling in a non-dual, mystic state. I guess consciousness can take probably infinite forms, but seeing through the illusion of a separate self does not mean experience no longer happens in terms of someone here experiencing something there, in terms of subjective pole and objective pole. What seeing through atta means is that one knows, with the utter conviction that arises from seeing for oneself, that although consciousness presents things in terms of inside/outside etc., there is in fact no actually existing, separate subject having the experience. You aren't taken in by the way in which experience presents itself.

And of course it is not that in seeing through the illusion of a separate self we move from having one, to suddenly not having one. There has never been a self-existent ‘I’, and never will be. We have been functioning our whole life without atta, without there being some separate ‘I’ doing it all, or experiencing it all – even though we believe otherwise. So in this sense nothing changes with seeing the truth of anatta. Experience, pratitya samutpada flows on, just as it always has done.

Our own expectations around what seeing into the truth of anatta means may be one of the main obstacles to actually seeing. We may not even recognise the extent to which we have already been able see this truth for ourselves. We may not take our own seeing of ‘the way things really are’ seriously enough to allow that seeing to transform us. Or, of course, we may make too much of even a small glimpse of this truth and fall into ‘spiritual’ egotism.

A mandala of practices

So all 5 aspects “can be seen as the principal elements of the Dharma life at all stages” and therefore at the stage of Spiritual Death. They are all ways of talking about, experiencing and practising Spiritual Death. And they are all ways into Spiritual Death. Focusing on Spiritual Death in terms of seeing through the illusory nature of self is vital. It is the essence of this stage. But I’d suggest it doesn’t mean we should think of this stage of the Dharma life purely in terms of insight into anatta. While it *is* insight into anatta, it is not just that. The other 4 aspects of the Dharma life need to be fully present if we are to really establish the stage of Spiritual Death and its fruits.

This of course means that there are a number of ways of practising this stage of the Dharma life, and that they need to be held in balance. Sangharakshita’s system implies that at all stages of our Dharma life we need to be careful to keep all dimensions of Dharma practice present. One implication of this is that if we’re finding one particular practice really useful, and become particularly enthusiastic about it, it’s probably wise to make sure that we are putting that practice in a broader understanding of and approach to the Dharma life. Ways in which we *might* lose sight of this are over emphasising, or at least emphasising in a one-sided way, mindfulness, tonglen, pure awareness, direct pointing, or ‘visualisation', for example. Each of these practices tend to emphasise one of the 5 aspects. They’re all great and at any one time can be our main source of inspiration and practice (even through the many years of our Dharma life), but if we take a Triratna approach to practice then they need to be continuously brought into balance with the rest of the mandala of practice. They at least need to be practised in a way that allows all 5 aspects to be really present in our lives.   If not, we close down to the rich, mysterious nature of the Dharma as emerging Reality.

I’ll take what we are calling direct pointing as an example, because I have personal experience of it via the Liberation Unleashed site and because it is very much in the air at the moment. I personally think it’s got a lot going for it ('direct pointing’, not LU) and I have found it very helpful as a support to seeing more clearly and directly for myself the truth of anatta to the degree I have. I’m glad we are doing a pilot scheme to explore its worth. Direct pointing involves focused dialogue as a way of supporting and deepening our attempt to look directly at experience, and particularly the belief in a separate self. It can be an effective way of working on seeing through the illusory nature of 'self', especially as dialogue with another person about our experience and exploration of ‘I’ can really help us to keep the sense of ‘self’ in focus. Amongst other things, it helps us to stay with that ‘koan’ of an imagined ‘I’ trying to see through itself.

However, I think we need to remember that direct pointing is only *one* way of working on seeing through the illusion of self. I've found direct pointing to be a very direct way at coming to see the illusion of self, but I need to remember that not everyone is going to work like that, and that some others might even find it counter-productive. I also need to remember that seeing through the illusion of self, though vital, is itself only *one* aspect of Spiritual Death as a stage (and of course Spiritual Death itself is only one stage on the road to ‘overcoming self-clinging’ and finding Freedom). Because the stage of Spiritual Death is multi-faceted it means that any one of us may come at in a different way to another of us, and so maybe experience it and describe it from a different angle.

For example, some Order members' main approach to looking at the belief in a separate self may take place within the context of a strong practice of connecting with a Buddha or Bodhisattva and reciting their mantra - we may come to see the truth of annata through experiencing and reflecting on body and mind as being completely and utterly made up of the purifying nectar of Vajrasattva. It will have an equally transformative effect on consciousness in terms of seeing the truth of anatta, yet the way in which we frame it all will be a bit different. Though there is a seeing of the emptiness of self, this approach reflects more strongly the aspects of spiritual receptivity and spiritual rebirth in Spiritual Death. It may be that the most meaningful way for some people to talk about the stage of Spiritual Death is as a direct experience of the ‘yidam’, unmediated by ideas, and as a *giving up* of ‘self’. Seeing the emptiness of 'self' may come about through much more of an actual felt dissolution of self in the presence of Reality.

In his essay ‘Getting beyond the ego’ Sangharakshita wrote: *“The non-egoistic attitude assumes two principal forms. In the first, all activities are attributed to the Other, and the subject confesses his utter inability to perform any action whatsoever, whether good or bad. This is the devotional form of the non-egoistic attitude. Herein the devotee surrenders himself body and soul to the object of his adoration. In the second form of the non-egoistic attitude the practitioner simply watches himself as he performs the various actions of life, whether sacred or profane, and constantly bears in mind that they are all egoless and empty, that there is action but no actor, deed but no doer. This is the more intellectual form of the non-egoistic attitude. By these two methods the ego-sense is gradually attenuated.”* He then goes on to stress the need for the second approach to practice, i.e. bearing in mind that all actions are empty. However, the point is that this is not the only approach to or aspect of Spiritual Death.

 Sustaining our insight

The 5 aspects of our system not only offer a way into each stage of the Dharma life and help us to understand its full significance, they also point to what is involved in establishing ourselves in each stage. Spiritual Death is not only seeing through the illusion of a separate self, it is establishing ourselves in that insight. It is vision *and* transformation. Seeing into anatta and the illusion of self is in some ways spectacularly simple. It’s just seeing what is (or rather, what isn’t). Perhaps the more demanding task is allowing that insight to become the basis of ‘being’, so bringing about the end of dukkha, and Liberation. Insight into anatta needs to move into all aspects of our Dharma life. With insight into the illusion of a separate self, greed, hatred and confusion do not go away, nor is there necessarily constant awareness of ‘no-self’ (in these senses, at least, it is surely confusing to talk about irreversibility). As Ayya Khemma says, we need to “fortify, resurrect and firmly establish” our seeing for ourselves more fully, and we do so by sustaining it through the cultivation of the 5 aspects informed by that insight. And with that of course the Dharma life flows on to the stage of Spiritual Rebirth, where those same 5 aspects form a new constellation, this time with the aspect of spiritual rebirth at the centre. On the basis of seeing what isn't, we open to what is.

Talking about Spiritual Death

Of course we need to include traditional takes on the Dharma life and make sure that our way of looking at things is coherent with tradition, but it seems to me that thanks to Sangharakshita’s system we now have the possibility of talking about what is going on using a language that allows for authenticity and immediacy. I’d suggest that the language of Sangharakshita’s system of Dharma life allows us to talk freely, directly, empathetically, engagingly and helpfully about actual experience, and to place vipashyana - and where we are in relation to it - within a meaningful and useful context for discussion. Our system of Dharma life allows us to talk about spiritual experience without getting caught up – and perhaps hung up – on traditional terms and on perhaps unquestioned expectations. We can for example talk much more straightforwardly about whether we see directly and for ourselves that the belief in a self is an illusion, or that the 5 skandhas are empty of ‘I, me, mine’, or that there is experience but no really existing ‘experiencer’, without raising the ghost of spiritual status seemingly inevitably linked for us with terms such as Insight, Stream-Entry, Irreversibility, Bhumis and the arising of the Bodhicitta. At present this seems particularly important as the stage of Spiritual Death becomes not only more clearly the task before us but as we begin to try to talk about our varied experience of moving into it, and of helping others to do likewise.

Through Sangharakshita’s system of Dharma life, with its different aspects, we have a useful – and I think for us essential - model for recognising different approaches to Spiritual Death and being able to talk about them as a community in a way that can be meaningful for all. And we can use the system offered by Bhante to help us not fall into over emphasising any one aspect and any one practice, so staying open to a sense of the richness and mystery of the Dharma as both path and Reality - for ourselves and for others.