A Note from the Publisher

We hope you will enjoy this Wisdom book. For your convenience, this digital edition is delivered to you without "digital rights management" (DRM). This makes it easier for you to use across a variety of digital platforms, as well as preserve in your personal library for future device migration.

Our nonprofit mission is to develop and deliver to you the very highest quality books on Buddhism and mindful living. We hope this book will be of benefit to you, and we sincerely appreciate your support of the author and Wisdom with your purchase. If you'd like to consider additional support of our mission, please visit our website at wisdompubs.org.

What I Don't Know about Death

Reflections on Buddhism and Mortality

C. W. Huntington Jr.

Wisdom Publications
199 Elm Street
Somerville, MA 02144 USA
wisdomexperience.org

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Huntington, C. W., author.
Title: What I don't know about death: reflections on Buddhism and mortality / C. W. Huntington, Jr.
Description: First. | Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2021003532 (print) | LCCN 2021003533 (ebook) | ISBN 9781614297505 (paperback) | ISBN 9781614297659 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Death—Religious aspects—Buddhism. | Buddhism—Customs and practices. | Huntington, C. W.
Classification: LCC BQ4487 .H86 2021 (print) | LCC BQ4487 (ebook) | DDC 294.3/423—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021003532
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021003533

ISBN 978-1-61429-750-5 ebook ISBN 978-1-61429-765-9

25 24 23 22 21
5 4 3 2 1

Cover design by Jim Zaccaria. Interior design by Tony Lulek.

Contents

Prologue

THIS BOOK HAS GROWN out of a lifelong immersion in an ancient vision of the world and of what it means to be human. It is a record of my efforts to learn about and understand my relationship to the doctrines and practices that go under the general rubric of Buddhism. In my professional life I'm a scholar, trained to read and interpret Sanskrit and Tibetan texts from a philological or historical point of view, but in this book I approach Buddhism at an intimate, personal level, attempting as best I can to incorporate Buddhist ideas into my own thinking in a way that pays respect both to my academic training and to indigenous Asian traditions, by taking what they have to say as worthy of sustained, critical attention.

When I began studying Buddhism I was a young American possessed by a need to go in search of a wisdom I was convinced I could not find at home. This search eventually led me to graduate school and then to India, where I lived and studied for years, interweaving what I learned there with what I had brought with me and with events in my personal life as they unfolded. This created from the beginning an unavoidable tension.

As a matter of principle, the classical philosophical and religious traditions of India consider it bad form to lay claim to originality. Nevertheless, in my efforts to incorporate these ideas and practices into my own life I have doubtless interpreted them in ways that would appear foreign to orthodox Buddhist teachers. It was never my intention, however, to simply adopt Asian Buddhist ideas and practices wholesale;

rather my project has always been to understand, as best I could, the ancient teachings, and to bring them into my life as a modern Westerner committed to living within the forms of my own culture, shaped as it is by the intellectual, artistic, and religious traditions of Europe and North America.

I am accustomed to writing for an academic audience; in that kind of writing the aim is to meticulously analyze distinctions unearthed by historical and philological investigation of classical Buddhist texts in the original languages and make arguments about them. This is not my aim here. In this book I'm interested in forging a synthetic understanding based on my own interpretations—interpretations informed both by my intellectual training and my lived experience—of the core doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism as they are found in the Indian tradition and, to a lesser extent, as those same doctrines were adopted and modified in Tibet, China, and Japan. I'm fully aware that in writing from this perspective, without including all the supporting critical apparatus common in academic books and journals, I leave myself vulnerable to the accusation that I may have blurred some important distinctions among various Buddhist schools, texts, and traditions. When taken on its own methodological terms, this accusation merits response. Be that as it may, in these essays I am operating on other terms, with other goals in mind. I have no proposition to defend, and therefore no need to worry about whether what I say here is right or wrong. I am not presenting an argument; I am painting a picture. What may look at times like an argument is better understood as a series of brush strokes on a canvas, for my intention is not to convince but to inspire. I want to inspire my readers to look deeply into themselves and into the world where they live and dream. I want them to look beyond thought, beyond belief, beyond hope and expectation, desire and fear, beyond even imagination. I see this book not as a rational analysis or explanation of Buddhist philosophical doctrine, much less as a reasoned argument in support of my approach to reading Buddhist literature. Rather, this book is best viewed as an exhibition or showing of that approach—an attempt, that is, to put this particular way of reading on display along with the pecu-

liarly intimate form of truth it makes available. In this respect this book is a continuation of work I began with the writing of my novel, *Maya*.[1]

I am a voracious reader of contemporary philosophy and literature, both of which have profoundly shaped the writing of this book. In my view, poetry and fiction offer a wonderfully nuanced hermeneutical lens through which to appreciate the psychological sophistication of Buddhist ideas and practices. Critical reflection, logic, and rational argumentation play an essential role in generating intellectual conviction or belief, and they have factored heavily in the development of Indian Buddhist thought; but intellectual conviction and belief are not in themselves sufficient catalyst for the type of radically transformative "unknowing" that characterizes Buddhist awakening.[2] What is ultimately required, in my view, is a sensitivity for the metaphorical underpinnings of all language—including the language of reasoned argument with its implied search for objective, literal truth—a point I will return to at intervals throughout these essays.[3]

In addition to fiction and poetry, the Hebrew Bible and the writings of certain Christian authors have also been useful to me, despite the fact that my own relationship with Christianity has been spotty. I was raised Methodist, but after my parents left the church when I was around twelve, I never looked back. Then, somewhere along the line after graduate school, I experienced a growing interest in theistic religion. It may have been the influence of living in India for all those years: exposure to the "philosophical God" of Vedanta, to the aesthetic radiance of Kabir's devotional poetry, or perhaps to the sheer exuberance of the Hindu pantheon. My interest in theism may also have grown organically out of the necessity, at the small liberal arts college where I teach religious studies, to place myself in meaningful conversation with my students, most of whom identify as Christian. Whatever the case, over the years this interest in Christianity has blossomed, fed primarily by my discovery of a whole new world of enchanting literature. I'm not only referring here to modern classics like the fiction of Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky, or to the mystic eloquence of the medieval apophatic tradition that led from Dionysius the Areopagite through St. Augustine, St. Bonaventure, and Meister Eckhart to *The Cloud of*

Unknowing. I also have in mind contemporary authors like Denys Turner, David Bentley Hart, and the Pulitzer Prize–winning novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson—all of whose work is a palliative for anyone who finds the New Atheists and their scientism intellectually superficial and grindingly tedious.[4]

My students frequently ask if I am Buddhist. I usually respond by explaining that, through some obscure karmic dispensation, I've spent my adult life studying and practicing Buddhism, but I do not call myself Buddhist. This hesitation implies no judgment whatsoever about Westerners who identify as Buddhist. Here, as in other ways, my outlook has no doubt been deeply—and perhaps (I'll freely acknowledge) perversely—influenced by the writings of the Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna. Nagarjuna is a connoisseur's skeptic; his work articulates the apex of skeptical thought in a tradition noted for its commitment to skepticism, to letting go of all dogmatic formulas and labels and of every definition of the self. To read Nagarjuna in the original Sanskrit has been among the most profound and satisfying experiences of my life.

Finally, I should say something about the title of this book, and about the book's recurrent evocation of death. For me—and, as I believe, for Buddhist traditions in general and perhaps for all religions—death casts a long, dark shadow over human affairs, raising questions that defy any simple, formulaic response. And yet, all the while, the existential reality of our predicament as self-conscious, mortal creatures continues to press in from all sides in a way that makes it impossible to ignore. Contemplation of death—*memento mori*—is central to any spiritual path.

As I write these words, we are, all of us, struggling to come to terms with a worldwide pandemic. Death has unexpectedly gripped our communal imagination. Apart from the pandemic, and speaking in the most personal of terms, a great deal has changed since I began work on this book. Not long ago I was diagnosed with terminal cancer. I have, most likely, less time than I would prefer to set my affairs in order. And so, with due respect to the British philosopher Christopher Hamilton, I do not, in this moment, feel wholly or even sufficiently insulated from the tragedy of life.[5] When it comes to death, I no longer have the luxury of writing at a distance. Or not much of a distance, at any rate. Never-

What I Don't Know about Death

I KNOW NEXT TO nothing about death.

It's not as if I never had any opportunity to learn. In Michigan, where I grew up, the first thaw of early spring regularly draws back the curtain on a gallery of small, frozen bodies, the partially decomposed remains of mice and squirrels and sparrows scattered in a tangle of twigs and leaves and cigarette butts and crushed soda cans and the sodden pages of last year's magazines. Detritus from another journey around the sun. There would as well have been a parade of weightless corpses dangling under sinks or in the shadowed corners of our attic and basement. All of this would have been on show, plainly visible to any child with eyes to see. Enough, certainly, to provoke what Nietzsche once called "the great suspicion." But my first memory of death is not of these countless, simple markers found everywhere in nature; rather, it is of a stunningly cruel act of genocide, the ruthless execution of an entire population of innocent lives.

I can track this event back to the first half of the 1950s, which makes it one of a handful of my earliest memories. I would have been around five or six years old. At that age, the sense of myself as a conscious agent was only just beginning to take hold. Possessed of a great curiosity about the world and a burgeoning interest in science, I was anxious to wield what little authority I had in order to pry my way into nature's secrets. It was one of those stifling hot, late July afternoons in the Midwest, when the cicadas buzzed in the trees like miniature chainsaws and mothers hydrated their children with grape Kool-Aid, refilling their

plastic mugs from a pitcher stored in the Frigidaire. I had spent most of the afternoon in our backyard, on my hands and knees, catching grasshoppers. It's not difficult. You simply cup your hands around their stiff green exoskeletons and scoop them up. You can feel their angular legs pumping frantically there in the darkness, tickling your palms as they struggle to get free. I found plenty of them—enough to fill one of the mason jars my mother used for making jelly from the cherries my sister and I pulled from the branches of the tree behind our house. When the jar couldn't hold any more grasshoppers, I tightened the lid and brought it to the back stoop, setting it down on the cool, shaded concrete, where I could closely inspect my captives. My hands were stained with their saliva, brown smears of "tobacco juice."

I don't recall whether what I did next had been part of the original plan. The idea may have come to me as I watched the grasshoppers impotently kicking against the shiny glass walls of their prison. I do have a clear memory, though, of standing beside the stove, waiting for the water to boil. And I remember carrying the hot kettle outside, the smooth Bakelite handle nestled against my palm, the wooden screen door slamming behind me. I remember carefully unscrewing the lid, steam burning my knuckles as I filled the jar with scalding water. I remember being fascinated by the grasshoppers wriggling and squirming, how they flexed their powerful legs, how it took several minutes before they quit fighting and finally grew still.

This was the beginning of my early career as an assassin. I soon discovered that there were as many ways to kill as there were moths and spiders and other small creatures to be killed. Which is to say, the possibilities were endless. For the adults—whom I closely observed—it was enough to thoughtlessly crush the little bodies under the heel of a shoe, or attack them with the fly swatter we kept hanging on a hook in the kitchen closet, next to the broom and dustpan. But for a small child overflowing with curiosity, there were other, more creative and engaging ways to take these seemingly insignificant lives. One could easily pass an hour, for instance, hovering over an anthill with a magnifying glass, carefully bringing the intensely focused point of light to bear on one insect after another, watching each one sizzle and curl, their legs folding in on them-

selves. If I listened very closely I could hear a faint crackle, like the sound made when my mother stripped the cellophane wrapper from a package of Lucky Strikes and crumpled it between her fingers.

In those days all the boys I knew had BB guns. I had a Daisy pump-action one that I carried with me in the autumn when my father and my uncles went pheasant hunting, all of us tramping together among rows of dried cornstalks, their parched yellow leaves rustling against our arms and legs, the mist of our breath taking shape in the crisp autumn air. My uncle Keith's two spaniels ranged ahead, close to the earth, moving in a broad arc. While the men patiently waited for a bird to panic and hurl itself up into the sky, my cousins and I worked the edge of the meadow near the woods, shooting indiscriminately at anything we saw. Songbirds, mostly—sparrows and goldfinches and red-winged blackbirds perching in the bare branches of the trees. When the BB struck, they would flutter for just a moment, then drop like ripe fruit. Often they would still be alive when they hit the ground, beating their wings uselessly against the leaves while we finished them off with a few more shots fired at close range.

Every summer during my elementary school years I stayed for a few weeks with my grandparents in the small Michigan town of Eaton Rapids. They lived just blocks away from Horner Woolen Mills, an abandoned factory on a bank of the Grand River. A three-story complex of crumbling red brick, broken timbers, and vacant, shattered windows. My cousin Greg and I passed whole afternoons roaming the hallways that opened on either side into cavernous rooms lined with long metal tables and gigantic industrial machines bristling with corroded gears and pulleys. By that time we had graduated to CO^2 powered pellet guns and found there was an endless supply of rats scurrying provocatively in and out of sight.

During the days leading up to the Fourth of July, fireworks began to appear. Teenagers with cars would drive down to Ohio, where such things were legal, returning with a trunk load of contraband explosives. The slim cylinders of Black Cats could be shoved down the throats of snakes and turtles who were then turned loose, fuses hissing between their thin lips as they fled for safety. You could drop waterproof Cherry

Bombs and Silver Salutes off the bridge, down into shallows near the bank of the river, where they erupted in a furious geyser of brown water, flinging the mangled bodies of carp and smallmouth bass several feet into the air. The boys who did these things were the same boys who delighted in hunting frogs with darts. I was present for all of this. I watched but was repelled by what I saw. Shooting at a moving target was one thing; this, evidently, was another. What most bothered me was their laughter. These boys did not seem to understand that death was a serious business.

The period of my innocence—if such it had been—ended abruptly one summer afternoon between sixth and seventh grade. I was roaming the woods near my home, my weapon slung over one shoulder, when I spotted a squirrel climbing up the side of a broad oak tree. I raised the rifle and shot. A pellet gun can't easily kill an animal that size, but the shot nevertheless penetrated the squirrel's flesh. It lost its grip and skidded down several feet, then managed to sink its nails into the bark and frantically pull itself upward. I fired again, and once more the squirrel faltered, slipped down a foot or so and dug in, climbing strenuously upward, slower now but still determined to escape. I took several more shots before it finally let loose, dropped to the ground and lay there twisting and raking at the earth. Where the pellets had entered, the fur was torn and matted with blood. I stood and watched life ebb away. The little jaws opened and closed, releasing a trickle of red saliva that formed a small pool at my feet. At last the squirrel's head jerked back in one final violent exertion, and it lay still.

This was certainly nothing new. By then I had witnessed the death of dozens of small creatures. But for some reason, this time, I did something I had never done before: I went home and told my mother. I found her sitting at the kitchen table, drinking a cup of tea, a basket of laundry at her feet. She listened quietly as I described what had transpired. When I finished she did not immediately respond. But when, after what felt like an immense silence, she at last spoke, I was shaken by the anger and disappointment in her voice. *You should be ashamed. I'd like to go down to the woods and find that poor squirrel and bring it back and put it right in the middle of your bed.*

Is it possible she hadn't realized, until that afternoon, what I was doing all those years with the guns? Did she imagine this was the first time I'd murdered a small animal for no other reason than to watch it die? And why, on this particular occasion, did I suddenly feel it necessary to confess? I must have known how she would respond. Maybe I needed to hear her angry words in order to confirm what I had myself been suspecting. Whatever my motive, by the time my mother finished speaking, I knew the killing was over. I stashed the guns in a back corner of my closet, out of sight, and never touched them again.

Until then death had been an object of fascination, an intricately cut jewel that I held carefully between two fingers, turning it this way and that as the light skimmed across its surface. Taking these small lives was a way of engaging with death while still keeping it at a safe distance, a declaration of my own strength. But now, on the brink of adolescence, I had for the first time caught a faint glimpse of my image staring back at me. There was something wrong here, something far beyond the scope of my influence. Something I could neither understand nor evade.

During these same childhood years, I witnessed a string of naturally occurring deaths. First the loss of several hamsters, all of them named Hammy. Hammy 1 and Hammy 2 died at night, burrowed down in the cedar shavings. We found Hammy 3 stiff and cold, huddled in one corner of the cardboard box where he had been sleeping. Each of these small bodies was wrapped in a swath of cotton from my mother's ragbag and dutifully buried under the hedge in our backyard. There was a chameleon I purchased from a man at the Barnum and Bailey circus; it had barely stirred at the end of its fine silver chain before I noticed, the day after I brought the poor creature home, that the slender, scaled body gripping my shoulder was lifeless and rigid.

And there was Stanley, an Easter chick from the Kresge discount store. Every spring several dozen such chicks would appear, weightless balls of fluff dyed various shades of pastel pink and green and blue, crowded together in a glass aquarium lit from above by a single bare incandescent bulb. Remarkably, Stanley survived and grew into a fat white rooster that perched on his cage in our heated garage next to my father's magnificent, gleaming Buick Electra 225. For quite a while a few

death. If she were alive, the two of us might easily have been friends; in a sense, we were. I found her mesmerizing. Her feet, two shriveled stumps of leathery flesh, protruded from one end of the blanket. Her arms were drawn up and folded across her chest, the tendons in her wrists and the backs of her hands stretched tight under dull yellow skin. Nails sprouted obscenely from the tips of her fingers and toes like long, curling claws. Her eyes were closed, as if she were lost in some ancient reverie, her thin lips pulled back in a feral grin.

It was around this time, when I was in fifth grade, that I first experienced the death of someone close to me. My mother's father collapsed in the basement of his home in Asheville, North Carolina, while shoveling coal into the furnace. Madison Stuart Hodges was an honorable, aristocratic gentleman, someone who displayed the kind of manners often associated with the South. Everyone in the family, including his grandchildren, called him "M.S." My grandmother found him down there in his vest and bow tie, sprawled on the floor next to a broken-down wheelbarrow, his fingers still gripping the shovel. His coat had been carefully folded and hung over a banister. The iron door of the coal burner was open, and light from the flames must have flickered across his face.

I have a vague memory of my mother speaking into the receiver of our heavy black phone, talking with Mama—that's what we all called her mother—in urgent, hushed tones. I knew something terrible had happened, though I could not grasp precisely where the terror lay. Within hours we had packed our suitcases and loaded them into the trunk of the car. There were no interstate expressways then, and the drive from Michigan to North Carolina was a series of two-lane highways meandering through the dark Midwestern countryside, through the villages and towns of Ohio and into the hills of Kentucky and Tennessee. We drove all night in my father's big Buick sedan; my sister slept stretched out on the back seat under a blanket while I curled up on the floor, my legs arched over the hump in the carpet where the driveshaft passed through. I remember the steady hum of tires against the pavement, the warm air from the heaters under the seat. And I recall something of my grandparents' house, the formal portraits on

the wall, my parents dressing for the funeral, my grandmother in a black pillbox hat and veil. At the funeral home my mother led me to the enormous metal casket. The upper half of the lid was open, tilted back so I could see the quilted satin lining. Standing there holding her hand, I was just tall enough to peer over the edge to where my grandfather lay so alarmingly still, wearing his old-fashioned suit and delicate, rimless glasses, his hands folded neatly across his chest in a way the made me think of the mummy girl.

My mother's mother went next. Ollie Irene Barrough Hodges. Mama. She had been visiting us in Michigan when she slipped on the icy stairs in front of our home, fell, and broke her hip. After that she continued to decline both physically and psychologically. The last years of her life were spent in a convalescent home—that's what they were called in those days, when such places were relatively rare. The place where my grandmother convalesced was a stately Victorian mansion with carefully tended gardens, its long, sloped lawn stretching to the banks of the Grand River. There, among the ornate polished furniture and the regular chiming of a grandfather clock, she slipped through a hidden doorway into a world of her own, a place inaccessible to the rest of us. She recognized no one, nor did she speak. Still my mother visited her several days a week, sat by her side for many long years, and stroked the thin strands of her silver hair until death finally took what little remained.

After that it was Laverne Huntington, my father's father. I must have been around sixteen when he died. In my memory, he is a slight, taciturn man in rumpled gray workpants and a flannel shirt, sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Except on Sundays, when he went to church with my grandma. Then he wore a dark brown suit and fedora. Not one of those raffish little things that Frank Sinatra was famous for, tilted back high over his forehead; my grandfather's hat had gravitas. It was a 1940s model made of wool felt that had grown soft after a decade of use in sun and rain and snow. The brim was substantial, the front dipped slightly downward, and the back edge had a gentle upward curve.

In the years immediately following their marriage, he and my grandmother owned a small farm, but the land was repossessed by the bank

during the early years of the Depression. The horse, a few cows, and most of the tools were sold at auction. They took what remained, along with their four young children, and moved into town, where the family did whatever they could to make money. My grandfather worked as a day laborer and, later, as the local distributer for the Detroit Free Press. Eventually they saved enough money to purchase a dump truck, and he contracted with a nearby gravel pit to make deliveries. As children, my cousins and I loved to ride in the back of that truck, perched atop a load of sand as we sped along Michigan's back roads. Grandpa slipped imperceptibly out of my life while I was busy with school and friends, with meeting girls, with my rock band and motorcycle. I looked up briefly and found that he was gone.

All the years I was growing up, my father's mother—Gladys—was either weeding the garden out behind their house or in the kitchen cooking. I seldom saw her without an apron. Dinners were pot roast or honey-glazed ham with mashed potatoes and vegetables from the garden. She would get the water boiling and send me out with a bucket to fetch corn. I remember snapping the ears off the tall stalks, pulling back the translucent green husks, the even rows of yellow kernels cool and smooth and damp against my fingers. There was always a pie on the kitchen counter—cherry or apple—and a crockery jar filled with chocolate chip cookies. In the mornings of my summer visits, she served up an endless succession of blueberry pancakes. Grandma lived long enough to see me through college and into a first, brief marriage and a series of adventures in Europe. I worked on a farm in Norway, taught English in Greece, got divorced, began graduate school, and at twenty-five went off to India for four years to study Sanskrit. I returned to Michigan just in time to see her through her dying. The scene played out in the emergency room of a small rural hospital, where she lay attached to a ventilator on a gurney under a bank of bright, antiseptic lights. She would never again breathe on her own. In the adjoining room, my father and his siblings sat around a table trying to decide what to do. When my father suggested that the tube be removed from her throat, his younger brother accused him of wanting to murder their mother. All of this took place in the late 1970s, when the medical technologies

that prolong our dying were only beginning to emerge and conversations like this were something new.

As it happened, my father would be the next one to die, only five years later. By that time I was in the final stage of graduate school. I had a Smithsonian grant that allowed me to return to India for research on my dissertation, and I was scheduled to leave just after Christmas. For some months he had been experiencing increasing difficulty just getting around. He was in constant discomfort and now walked only with the help of a cane. Through it all, the doctors had insisted he was suffering from arthritis. Then, in late November—only a month before I was scheduled to fly to New Delhi—the results of a biopsy showed that he had multiple myeloma, a form of cancer that begins in the marrow of the bones and metastasizes from there to the blood and kidneys and lungs. At the time of the diagnosis, my parents were preparing to leave for a tour of art historical sites in China, but they were forced to cancel their plans so my father could begin treatment. Neither my mother nor my father was prepared to accept the reality of the situation. In fact, no one in my family was able to fully comprehend the seriousness of his condition. To return the grant and curtail my research plans was clearly not on the table; doing so would have been to admit the gravity of my father's illness, and that was precisely what none of us were willing to do.

And so, early on a cold, snowy morning in the first week of 1984, I found myself standing in my parents' kitchen with my bags packed, ready to leave for Detroit Metro airport. My father was wearing his flannel pajamas, a dark blue rayon bathrobe, and slippers. He walked slowly across the room, leaning on his cane, gripped my hand in his, and held it. Our eyes met. He was sixty-seven years old, already stiff and frail from the effects of the disease, but his graying hair was, as I recall, still combed in place. He spoke some words of encouragement, wished me success in my research. Such was the nature of our charade that I did not allow myself to think: *I'll never see you again, Dad. I'll never again hear your voice. I'm leaving you here to die*. Nevertheless, over the course of the next year, cancer would turn him inside out with pain before finally bringing him to ruin. By the time my family contacted me and

I returned from South Asia, the funeral was over, his ashes relegated to an urn. Dust to dust.

My mother was devastated, enraged at the cruelty and injustice of the world, that a good man who had never done anyone any harm should suffer as he had suffered. She descended into a vortex of loneliness and misery from which she never emerged. Like her own mother had done almost thirty years before, she left us behind and took up residence in a place beyond the reach of our feeble sympathy. A year passed in this way, and then one night while visiting my younger brother in Baltimore, she went to sleep and never woke up. She too was cremated. I never saw her corpse, and I have no memory of the last time we were together. She simply vanished from my life without notice. I and my siblings buried her ashes along with my father's at the foot of a red maple on the campus of Michigan State University, where my father had spent most of his working life. The tree had been paid for and planted at our request, as a memorial, but owing to some local ordinance, we were forbidden to inter the ashes on public land. We performed this last rite surreptitiously, in the early evening on a weekend when no one was around to wonder what these four people were doing out behind the administration building, crawling around on their hands and knees with a shovel and two small urns. A year later the tree contracted a fungus, and the grounds crew dug it up with a backhoe, roots and all. They carted everything to the dump and planted another maple in its place. We might as well have scattered our parents' remains over the Baltic sea.

Since that time the losses have steadily mounted. All my aunts and uncles are now gone. Both sides of the family—an entire generation—erased. A few years ago my dear friend Karl died, seven months after being diagnosed with an aggressive thyroid cancer. More recently my father-in-law succumbed to congestive heart failure. Before they entered my life, these men were already husbands and fathers, someone's son and someone's brother. They had friends and colleagues, active lives in the community. They went out to dinner and to the theater, read books, argued, and laughed. And now the curtain has fallen on all of that, the sorrow and the joy are finished, and what remains is only so much as pliant memory permits.

The Life and Death of the Buddha

For although you may not believe it will happen,
you too will one day be gone.

GAUTAMA, PRINCE OF THE SHAKYAS, was destined from birth to become the Buddha. His mother, Queen Maya, dreamed that a tiny, vaporous white elephant descended effortlessly into her womb. Some months later the infant emerged, luminous and immaculate. Seven days after that, we are told, the queen died in the throes of an unbearable joy.

Thus begins the ancient story, as recounted in the second-century poet Ashvaghosha's epic Sanskrit poem *Life of the Buddha*.[8] And yet, apart from the extraordinary circumstances of his birth and, later on, a few cameo appearances by lesser deities, most versions of the biography agree that Prince Gautama's life was largely devoid of miracles or the kind of visionary experiences often taken as the defining trait of mysticism. As presented by Ashvaghosha and the Pali-language *suttas*, or discourses, the Buddha never denies the possibility of supernatural events or powers, or exotic visionary experiences, but he consistently maintains that they have little to do with his teachings and that concern with such things can become a diversion from the difficult work of spiritual practice.

Notwithstanding the wonders that attended his birth, the prince who became the Buddha was entirely human and vulnerable to a

panoply of human afflictions. He is important for us not because he transcended his humanity but because he burrowed so deeply into our common plight. In doing so he learned more about the pain of being human than most of us would care to imagine. Perhaps more than we could bear.

According to legend, shortly after the Buddha was born, an astrologer told the prince's father that the boy could grow up to be a powerful monarch—the mightiest ruler ever known—or he would renounce the world in order to pursue the life of a spiritual pilgrim. Were the latter to happen, the king's son would achieve universal renown as a wise man, a teacher and guide for others. Based on the astrological circumstances of his birth, it was impossible to know for certain which path his life would take.

Anxious to ensure that his boy would grow up to inherit the throne, the king devised a plan. First, he provided the prince every possible luxury. As a small child he was entertained and indulged; as he grew older, he was kept busy. His attention was constantly directed toward mastering the skills necessary for success in the world or toward gratifying his senses. If the young prince could not be kept entirely happy and preoccupied, he was at least taught to assume without question that life's purpose and happiness lies in doing and having, achieving and owning.

Here is our first important clue about the nature of the spiritual life as presented in this story: it is rooted in discontent and requires the kind of leisure that affords space for reflection on questions of meaning and value. The king obviously understood this, which accounts for his strategy: keep the prince occupied with practical affairs, and if at all possible, keep him happy. This way it will never occur to him to seriously question anything about the circumstances of his life.

Most of us begin life wrapped in a cocoon of innocence, even if we don't remain in it for very long. Unless born into a world of proximate violence or harsh poverty, a young child is to some extent unmindful of what might be called the disagreeable truths of life—its existential terrors and uncertainties, all those elements of existence that flourish outside the parameters of our will, embodied above all in the ever-present

specter of death. This is not to deny the dark sides of a child's psyche, with its own inherent fears and anxieties, only to suggest that for many of us there was a time in life when the greater understanding of our predicament as mortal creatures was relegated to the wings, when center stage was occupied with the delights and discoveries of a new world and its extravagant and seemingly endless wonders. Many parents want to keep it this way, at least for a while. We delight in our children's innocence, in the vision of life that it embodies, and we mourn its inevitable loss.

I was born in 1949 and grew up with all the optimism and comfort of a white, middle-class American life, surrounded by men who had fought in Europe or somewhere in the Pacific and were anxious to put that experience behind them. When they weren't working hard at making a living, the adults seemed to move from one party to the next. Nobody talked about the war. My father's army uniforms and medals were packed in a trunk stored up in the attic, out of sight. But in one corner of our living room, on a small shelf of books, someone had left a hardcover copy of the *Life's Picture History of World War II*. I passed many hours as an elementary school child sitting alone, transfixed by the glossy black-and-white photographs of human bodies tortured and maimed, corpses sprawled on the earth, hanging on barbed wire or stacked by the hundreds in trenches alongside the road. The pictures were graphic, but they were still only pictures. And then, without warning, death suddenly moved closer.

There was my grandfather's body at his funeral, lying in the open casket, meticulously groomed and consumed by a strange, unearthly stillness. He had become one of *them*. One of those people in the pictures.

How fragile is our happiness. How ultimately futile our struggle for control.

Prince Gautama is in his mid-twenties, married and with an infant son of his own, when he asks his father for permission to leave the palace grounds. Why should this man-child want to escape the idyllic life of the palace? Why do children yearn to grow up? For many the desire may be rooted in a fantasy of omnipotence that adults appear to embody.

To be an adult suggests, from the child's perspective, the possibility of total, uncompromising power along with the freedom to indulge one's every whim. For the prince it may be mere boredom or curiosity, a simple, unfocused thirst for something new. To be trapped on the palace grounds—no matter how extensive and luxurious—is nevertheless to be trapped. This suggests a subtle, discomfiting fact about pleasure, how the persistent gratification of desire brings in its wake an inevitable ennui.

The poet tells us that Prince Gautama has heard rumors of the enchanting qualities of the city's parks and groves and desires to see them for himself. The king reluctantly agrees to his son's request, and before long the day of his first outing arrives. The road leading to the municipal gardens has been cleared of anything that might upset the delicate sensibilities of this young man who, until this moment, has been kept ignorant of the suffering of the world. When his chariot passes through the palace gates, people are crowded along the way, eager to see their future king. As fate would have it, however—or, in Ashvaghosha's telling, as the gods arrange—a decrepit old man emerges from the crowd and stands in plain view, shrunken and feeble, hunched over his walking stick. One can imagine the encounter:

"Who is that person?" the prince asks his charioteer. "Why does he appear this way, so very distressed?"

"My Lord, he is broken by old age. He was once an infant, then a small child. But time has stolen his strength and beauty, withered his senses, and addled his mind."

"Is this condition peculiar to this man?"

"No indeed, my Lord. It is not."

"Will old age befall my wife?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"And my infant son? What of him?"

"He too, my Lord, will become like this in the course of time."

"And I as well? Is this my destiny?"

The charioteer nods.

"Take me back to the palace. I've seen enough for today."

Three more outings follow, each one bringing with it another revela-