Buddhist hospice care offers alternative to Western ideas of death

by Ken Chitwood in the December 16, 2020 issue

Sukhavati, a Buddhist center for the dying in northern Germany. (Photo courtesy of Oliver Peters)

In the past decade, a Buddhist end-of-life movement has sprung up in non-Buddhist countries, testifying to a need for spiritual accompaniment at the end of life that is felt not only by an aging generation of Buddhist immigrants and converts but by others who want something more than a secular, clinical approach.

Oliver Peters, head of spiritual care at Sukhavati in northern Germany, said the Buddhist center looks to the teaching of Tibetan Buddhist wisdom, particularly the best-selling Tibetan Book of Living and Dying by Sogyal Rinpoche.

In practice, this means the regular chanting of mantras, guided meditations on death, and instructions on the passages and obstacles faced in “the bardos”—the liminal states between death and rebirth.

Finally, the body is attended to for three days after death. This time allows the deceased to be honored by family and friends and guided through the bardos—and for the living to contemplate the separation of the body and mind at death.

A belief in Buddhism is not required, Peters said: “We don’t want to make people Buddhists. Everyone can come here—Muslim, Christian, atheist.”

In the rising popularity of places like Sukhavati is an implicit critique of conventional Western views of life and death. Frank Ostaseski, Buddhist teacher and cofounder of the Zen Hospice Project in San Francisco, said that, in a consumerist culture often enchanted by youth, Buddhist hospice care is offering an alternative. Its unvarnished view of death also offers a new perspective on living.

In a paper in the Journal of Pain and Symptom Management, Eva K. Masel, Sophie Schur, and Herbert H. Watzke write, “Buddhist teachings may lead to a more profound understanding of incurable diseases and offer patients the means by which to focus their minds while dealing with physical symptoms and ailments.”

Chenxing Han, author of Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists, spent a summer volunteering for the Brahmavihara AIDS Project in Cambodia, the country with the highest concentration of Buddhists.

“It was a humbling summer,” she said. “I did not speak Khmer, and my undergraduate degree had not taught me how to be present with people who are severely ill and dying. Many times I wanted to run away, to flinch from the reality before me.”

Her mentors at Brahmavihara helped her by modeling a spiritual care “suffused with steadiness, love, faith, and compassion,” she said.

After her time in Cambodia, Han volunteered at the Pathways hospice in California’s Bay Area and then enrolled for formal training as a Buddhist chaplain at the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies in Redwood City, California.

“For me, Buddhism isn’t all gloom and doom,” she said. “I appreciate Buddhism’s lessons for life and living as much as its insights on death and dying.”

Through her experiences, Han said, she learned that “the chaplain’s role is in many ways countercultural to the biomedical model of care.”

“In the chaplain’s view, death is not a failure but a sacred transition that awaits us all,” she said. —Religion News Service