

Face to Face with Death

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
Wednesday, 27 July 2011 16:03



More than 20 years ago, in my first job at 18 years of age, what I earned in an hour was not enough to buy a boxed meal for lunch. As a result, I often made do with instant noodles. The work was challenging, and although I did not have any work experience going into the job, the boss recognized my ability. I happily worked hard toward my dreams, and I never complained about my low wages. I looked forward to a successful career accompanied by luxurious homes, cars, scrumptious food, and pleasure to the end of time.

A few years later, I began doing well in the high-tech industry. Whenever I traveled on business, my clients treated me with great deference, taking me to all sorts of restaurants to sample the finest delicacies and the choicest selections of beef, lamb, pork, chicken, and lobster. I lived in Southern California, and my favorites there included Korean and Thai barbecue and dishes made from live seafood.

Evenings out were extravagant affairs for me. I could eat five pounds of lobster by myself at a single sitting on a date with my petite girlfriend. On one occasion, my friends and I cooked so much on our grill at a Korean barbecue restaurant that the grill, splattered with excess grease, caught fire. At seafood restaurants, I always ordered special items not even on the menu. A meal for my party often came to more than a thousand dollars. Such decadence was a true reflection of my life at the time.

Every few days I visited Japanese restaurants and ate raw fish; on weekends I bought live seafood from Chinese supermarkets to cook at home. The oxtail stew that I made was highly acclaimed by my acquaintances.

Some people said that the meat that I consumed in six years would last an ordinary person two decades. That was very true. I never ordered any vegetable dishes when I ate out; I never could see the appeal of vegetables. It's true, perhaps vegetables could provide some nutrients, but nobody in their right mind would feel that vegetables were delicacies any more than they would vitamins, would they?

Just as to be expected, such indulgence and extravagance eventually took a toll on my health. Great big red warning lights began to flash in the sixth year of my excess.

Burst bubbles

I had everything going for me at that time. I was a successful young man in many people's eyes, and I had worked hard to get where I was. When I was in junior high, my parents sent me from Taiwan to the United States to study so that I could receive a better education. Though the stress from a totally strange language and culture was difficult, I possessed an inexorable drive to succeed.

I began working full time after I graduated from high school. At 24, I started an Internet information technology company. Going to college was not particularly important to me, so I

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chose to work 80 hours a week while taking college courses part-time. Seeking fortune and material possessions was in my eyes a nobler and worthier pursuit in life than education. College took me seven years to complete.

That period was the zenith of my life. I had been naturalized as a United States citizen, and I was accomplished in my career. I was on a roll. Prepared to take the next step in life, I bought plane tickets for my girlfriend and me to go back to Taiwan and get engaged. I hadn't been home in 16 years. From the standpoint of traditional Chinese thinking, I would have a glorious homecoming.



But the life I had planned was not meant to be.

The warning signs started with a soreness in my right forearm. I ignored it for a long time, but after two years of persistent pain, the aching finally compelled me to see a doctor. That was in 1997, and I was 29.

My doctor took an X-ray of my arm and showed me the problem on one of the two bones that connected my right wrist to the elbow. The bone was white, solid, and clearly defined near my wrist. But it strangely became less and less defined as it neared the elbow.

After a battery of tests, the doctor diagnosed Ewing sarcoma, a rare form of cancer. My prognosis was grim: He thought that I might have only six months to live. The diagnosis was like a bolt of lightning; it completely unraveled everything in my life. I was plunged from the top of a successful career into an abyss of despair.

The doctor told me about my bone cancer just two weeks before our planned trip back to Taiwan. I stared at the test reports in the hospital, tears rolling down my face. How could life be so cruel? In the blink of an eye, all that I had achieved vaporized.

Was my life really coming to an end? Was waiting to die the only thing I could do? Who could help me? I had endless questions, but no answers. For the first time in my life, I gave up.

Death breathing down

Ewing sarcoma is a rare form of cancer caused by genetic mutations in the bone. Its treatment could be aptly summarized as sheer excruciating pain that makes death a much more humane and welcome alternative.

I was put on a three-week rotation for chemotherapy. The doctors said the chemo drugs would cause my blood vessels to harden and narrow, so they could not be administered through the blood vessels in the arms, which were too small. The drugs had to be injected into the veins near my heart, so the doctors put a portal catheter in my chest before the chemo regimen started.

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Before each chemo session, a nurse would very cautiously prepare the medicine for the injection. The ingredients were placed in a sealed glass box fitted with an exhaust fan. Access to the inside of the glass box and the drug cocktail contained therein was gained through two inward-bound tubes, at the ends of which were a pair of gloves.

The nurse put her hands through the access tubes into the gloves and mixed the drugs, careful not to make any contact with the concoction. Such precautions were necessary because the chemicals were highly toxic; any contact would burn holes through the clothing or ulcerate the skin.

After the mixture had been completed, the injection would start. Each injection lasted 160 hours—nearly seven days—during which I was literally in a coma. After a few such sessions, I was physically and mentally wrecked. Even worse, my tumor got bigger, not smaller, growing from five centimeters (1.97 inches) to seven (2.76 inches). The doctor declared the chemo treatment a failure and gave me two choices: go to a better doctor or stay with him and let him try something else.

This doctor was one of the top three most respected names in the States for bone cancer cases like mine, and he had treated more than a thousand such patients. I decided to stay with him.

So my treatment continued. Sometimes I went through five chemo drugs in a day. I shed pounds as well as stamina. I dropped from 187 pounds to 154, and I was so weakened that I could hardly stay out of bed for more than 30 minutes a day. My torment was unimaginable.

The meaning of life

Before I fell ill, I had never concerned myself with the meaning of life, much less how to face the end of it. Now, with death breathing down on me, I felt a profound sense of fear, loneliness, and helplessness—feelings that I'll never forget.



I had not been a religious person before. I never saw the need for religion; I felt that a man could do anything that he set his mind to. That confidence was shattered when the treatment failed; it was only then that I realized how little a man could do in the face of destiny.

In the helpless state that I was in, I began pondering the meaning of life and reflecting on what I had done with my life. I also started exploring Buddhism and reading sutras to learn how to face the impermanence of life.

In the Sutra of the Great Vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, I read the description of hell, how the beings there have their intestines pulled out, have their legs and feet cut off, or are fried or boiled in a pot. The horrid description made me gasp and break out in a cold sweat. But gradually, I began to realize that I had done these same things to the animals that I had eaten. Didn't I cause the animals I ate to suffer like the beings in hell in order to satisfy my palate?

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Unwittingly, I had caused suffering to so many innocent creatures!

It was only in the close proximity of death that I realized what I had done. The fish that was cooked alive for my enjoyment must have felt the same sort of fear that I felt when I believed that I was facing certain death.

I came to see the bad karma I had created, and I was deeply repentant. The bodhisattvas led me to this awakening. I told myself I must not kill another life again.

Vegetarianism

Before I was diagnosed with cancer, I was a self-righteous, quick-tempered, and severe man who found it hard to forgive others. What's more, I couldn't understand why we needed to help others—I didn't have the least desire to help others. My mind was always focused on how to earn more money. It wasn't until I felt I was nearing the end of my life that I realized to my alarm I was going to leave the world with absolutely nothing. The shock I felt finally awakened what little compassion I had in my heart.

I knew I had to change my way of life if I wanted a miracle to happen, so I made two vows to the bodhisattvas. First, I would adopt a vegetarian diet and never kill living creatures again. Second, I would follow in the footsteps of the Great Compassion Bodhisattva and help those in need.

Unlike some people, I had great difficulties eating vegetarian. In fact, it bordered on the impossible. I knew that quitting meat instantly would be out of the question, so I gave myself two years to warm up to the new food. I really wanted to succeed, and by the end of that period, I wanted to be meat-free.

When there were only three months left to go, I had all-vegetarian breakfasts. One month later, I ate meatless breakfasts and lunches. And in the last month before the end date, I ate vegetarian for all meals as much as possible. Finally, I started my meatless life as planned.

I am now in the eleventh year of being vegetarian. After numerous rounds of treatment, the cancer specialists were surprised to find that all my tests had turned up negative—there were no signs of cancerous cells. I was cancer-free and I was cured.

Many people have attributed my survival to vegetarianism, but understanding the karmic law of cause and effect as a follower of the Buddha, I'm convinced that it was my repentance and atonement that helped resolve my bad karma.



One doesn't need religion to know that living things don't want to die to become food for others. Must we deprive the lives of other beings to satisfy our gratification? Is our palate so hard to satisfy that we absolutely need meat in our diet?

I would never peddle a meatless diet for its taste—to me, lobsters, king crabs, or fancy steaks

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still taste better, but I hope to appeal to your reason. I write this article in the hope that my story can help your reason prevail over your desire for meat.

If your reason has already overcome your desire for meat, I bow deeply to you in deference. I compliment you for your ability to do what many others cannot, and I hope you continue on this path of great compassion and mercy.

If your reason can overcome your desire for meat eight times out of ten, I bow to you and compliment you, too. I suggest that you continue to strive for a completely meatless diet. Some Buddhists don't even eat eggs, milk products, leeks, green onions, or garlic (the last three items are considered to be sexually stimulating and thus not conducive to spiritual cultivation).

If your reason wins out half of the time, I also praise your achievement and suggest that you consider going meatless for your breakfasts and dinners.

If your reason dictates three times out of ten, I suggest that you have meatless breakfasts.

And finally, if your love of taste dominates reason almost all the time but you are still thinking of giving vegetarianism a try, I salute your courage. You have already planted a seed of goodness in your heart—a seed waiting for the right moment to sprout and grow.

Nothing is difficult if you have the will to do it. Though it's not easy to become a vegetarian, I sincerely hope that my story will give you some food for thought about what you eat.

By Cai Jin-hong
Condensed and translated by Tang Yau-yang

Он " [Легенды русских монастырей](#) " это запомнит, если опять " [Как сохранить здоровье Средства народной медицины](#) " возникнет разговор.

Но он никак не " [Пластуны его величества](#) " мог вспомнить, что " [От Руси к России](#) " с ним было не " [Приманка для двоих](#) " так.

Вы должны приехать сюда, и мы " [Педагогическая антропология](#) " обо всем " [Месть в три хода](#) " переговоры.

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Собственно, эти двое спасли " [180 лучших застольных песен](#) " ему жизнь.

Иди поздравайся с " [Остроумие и его отношение к бессознательному](#) "
Глорией и дядюшкой Натаном.

пробормотал он, " [Царство Небесное силою берется](#) " и, наконец, вспомнив,
закричал, сложив руки рупором, Новый дубль!

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