

Five Visions of a Dying Man

By

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Preface

Life beyond death and extra-temporal existence have so far posed most baffling questions to philosophers, psychologists, and students of human nature. Various opinions are held in this matter, but one thing that is certain is that we all must die. And on the very eve of death the passing person is often found to behave in a mental haze under the spell of some extra-temporal spirits. Psychologically these mental stages may be termed illusion, hallucination, or delusion. But sometimes, to an earnest observer, it might so happen that the whole phenomenon becomes a striking fact far stranger than fiction. One such thrilling experience happened to me many years ago when, as a monk, I stayed by the bedside of a dying gentleman. The experience had such an overwhelming impact on my mind that I subsequently undertook painstaking research on the conception of gods in the Pali Tipitaka.

Under the pressing demands from different quarters, I cannot resist the temptation to record my old experience, thereby holding a torch up for the large number of inquisitive persons who, I believe, will surely find this report interesting and illuminating. In this short venture I thankfully acknowledge the inspiration and cooperation received from the meditation teacher Anagarika Munindra, Dr. Arabinda Barua, M.A., Ph. D. (London), Barrister-at-Law, Prof. Sunil Barua, B. Sc., M.A., LL.B., B.Ed., and Smt. Krishna Barua, B.A.

Ven. Rastrapal Mahathera

Five Visions of a Dying Man

The incident to be described took place in 1957, four years after I had received higher ordination as a Buddhist monk. I was filled with enthusiasm and a great yearning to learn all that could be learnt about Buddhism. During the course of my studies the story of Dhammika Upasaka, as related in the Dhammapada Commentary, drew my attention.

Dhammika Upasaka was a devoted follower of the Buddha. Along with the members of his family he used to observe the tenets of the Dhamma most punctiliously. Once he fell ill and when he felt that he was nearing death, he sent to the Buddha for a number of monks to recite suttas by his bedside. The monks were accordingly sent and they started chanting the Satipatthana Sutta.

When they had chanted half the sutta he abruptly shouted, "Stop! Stop!" Hearing this, the monks were surprised. Thinking that the Upasaka had asked them to stop chanting, they stopped and went back to the Buddha.

The Buddha asked them why they had returned so early. They said that the upasaka asked them to stop, and that was why they had come back early before finishing the recital of the sutta. Lord Buddha told them that they must have misunderstood what the upasaka had said. The real cause, the Buddha explained, was otherwise. The upasaka had asked those devas (gods), who had come to take him to the heavens in their chariots, to stop their attempts to get him to come along. He had not asked the monks to stop their chanting.

I also came across stories in the Tipitaka and Commentaries about the appearance of gods or evil spirits at the moment of a person's death, in accordance with his kamma or action in his worldly life. I was perplexed by these stories as they did not agree with my rational mind. I approached the Venerable Jnanishwar Mahathera a profound scholar in Buddhism, who was the resident monk of a well-known monastery at Unainpura in Bangladesh. I put my problem to him. He related a gatha (verse) which was as follows:

*"Niraye aggikkhandho ca petalokañca andhakam,
tiracchanayoniñca mamsakkhandhañca manusam,
vimanam devalokamhi nimittam pañca dissare."*

"Those who will go to hell see the vision of a mass of fire, those who will go to the world of the petas see darkness and gloom all-around, those who will take birth as lower animals see visions of forests and animals and other creatures, those who will take birth as human beings see the vision of their dead relations, and those who will take birth in the celestial worlds have the vision of the heavenly palaces. These are the five visions which usually appear before a dying person." *

* Editor's note: The Pali verse and the English translation that is offered are not in complete agreement, but I am unable to locate the original of the verse to see if a line is missing.

The Venerable Mahathera explained this verse to me at great length, but I was left only half convinced. I needed a personal experience of the import of the verse to be fully convinced.

It was not long before I had the experience for which I longed. At the time I was staying at a vihara in a village named Tekota in Chittagong (Bangladesh). One day, after I returned from my college, which was some five miles away from my vihara, I was extremely tired and wanted to take a little rest in bed. Just then one gentleman from a neighbouring village came to the vihara and asked me to accompany him to the bedside of his brother-in-law, Mr. Abinash Chandra Chowdhury, who was seriously ill and was almost on the verge of death. The dying gentleman, who was fifty-six years of age, was a devout Buddhist and was well known for his piety. I got up and set out for his home.

When I reached his house, I found the place packed with his relatives and friends. They made way for me and on approaching the dying person I found him lying on a mattress spread on the floor. It was then about 8:30 in the evening. I was given a chair to sit upon. Before I started chanting the suttas appropriate for the occasion, a hush of silence descended over the place. People around were all in suspense. On many earlier occasions I had told the villagers in the course of my discourses that I was keen to verify what was stated in the verse about the appearance of the five visions at the moment of a person's death. It was, indeed, such a moment that had arrived.

When I reached his house, I found the place packed with his relatives and friends. They made way for me and on approaching the dying person I found him lying on a mattress spread on the floor. It was then about 8:30 in the evening. I was given a chair to sit upon. Before I started chanting the suttas appropriate for the occasion, a hush of silence descended over the place. People around were all in suspense. On many earlier occasions I had told the villagers in the course of my discourses that I was keen to verify what was stated in the verse about the appearance of the five visions at the moment of a person's death. It was, indeed, such a moment that had arrived.

I started to chant and when I had finished chanting a couple of suttas I heard the dying man feebly uttering the words "Buddha-Dhamma-Sangha, Anicca-Dukkha-Anatta" and "Metta-Karuna-Mudita-Upekkha" at intervals with much devotion. Next I observed that his condition was fast deteriorating. In order to have a close look at him to test the veracity of the verse about the five visions, I asked the people to spread a seat for me on the floor, beside the dying man. This was done.

The dying man was lying on his left side facing me. I placed my right hand on his right forearm and asked him how he was feeling. The reply was that the time had come for him to leave the world and he had no hope of living any longer. I tried to console him by saying that he was then only fifty-six years of age and could not possibly die so early in his life. His life devoted to righteousness, which was such a source of inspiration to his co-villagers, could not be cut short so soon.

I then asked him whether he would like to take the Five Precepts and hear some suttas. He replied in the affirmative and after administering the Five Precepts I recited a few suttas, which he listened to with great devotion. After pausing I felt curious to know whether he had any vision appearing before him. His eyes were closed all the time I sat by his bedside. I went on repeating my query at short intervals. He told me that he was having no vision at all.

At about 11:30 P.M. he muttered something. All of us at his bedside could make out that he was telling about the vision of the Bodhi Tree at Buddhagaya, where the Buddha had attained Full Enlightenment. The vision of the Bodhi Tree was perhaps a reminiscence of his visit to Buddhagaya. Then I asked him whether he had the vision of any other objects there. He exclaimed that his deceased parents were there and they were offering flowers to the Vajrasana ("diamond seat") under the Bodhi Tree. This he repeated twice. I then told him to ask his parents whether they would like to take the Five Precepts. He said they would and they were already waiting with folded hands to receive the precepts.

After administering the Five Precepts I again asked him whether his parents would like to listen to some suttas. When he replied in the affirmative I recited the Karaniya Metta Sutta. I felt thrilled at the turn of events, which coincided with the words of the verse on the five visions. Others present there also seemed to be thrilled. They were watching the scene with great excitement as this was something unprecedented for them.

It was then clear to me, on the basis of the verse, that the vision he had of his parents indicated that he was going to take birth in the world of human beings, and that also on a higher plane of human existence as he had the vision of the Bodhi Tree along with his parents. But I felt that a man of his devotion and piety deserved rebirth in a still higher plane of existence and I went on asking him whether he was having any other visions.

A little while later I found a change coming over him. He seemed to have turned worldly-minded and asked his relatives to free him from his debts. At that moment I asked him whether he was having any other vision before him. He feebly exclaimed he was seeing long hair. It was then 1:40 A.M. I asked him, "Do you see some eyes?" He replied, "I don't, because it is covered from head to foot with dark hair."

I could not make out what this apparition signified, but I guessed that if death had come to the gentleman at that moment he would have been reborn in some lower plane of existence. On a later date, when I wanted to have this vision clarified by the Venerable Jnanishwar Mahathera and from another learned monk, the Venerable Silalankara Mahathera, they both were of the opinion that the apparition meant that the dying man might have gone to the world of the petas if he had died at that moment. At that stage, in order to drive out the apparition, I started chanting the suttas. This had the desired result, for when I asked him whether the apparition was still there, the dying man exclaimed that it had vanished.

His attachment to his earthly existence seemed to be still persisting as he next asked his relatives to remove from under his bed a newly made mattress which he wanted to be kept for his only son, Mr. Sugata Bikash Chowdhury, who was then staying at a distant place, Durgapur in India. He did not want the mattress to be burnt with his dead body as was the custom with some Bangladeshi Buddhists in Chittagong. Thereafter he again fell into a state of extreme exhaustion.

I asked him what he was experiencing then. He replied he was seeing two black pigeons. At once I realized that it was the vision of the animal world where he was going to be reborn. The time was then 2 A.M. I did not want him to pass into the animal world and I again started reciting the suttas. When I had finished a few suttas, I again asked him whether he was having any vision. This time he replied there was no vision before him.

I then resumed discourses on the Dhamma and after a while again asked him whether any other vision was before him. I had to repeat my question several times and at last he exclaimed that he had seen a heavenly chariot approaching. Although I knew that no barrier could stand on the way of the heavenly chariot, still in honour of the devas I asked the relatives of the dying man to make way for the approach of the chariot. I then asked him how far the chariot was from him. He made a sign by his hand to indicate that it was by his bedside.

On asking him whether he saw anyone in the chariot, he said there were male and female heavenly beings in the chariot. I then told him to ask the heavenly beings whether they would take the Five Precepts. I had read in the scriptures that the devas obey and respect not merely monks but also pious lay devotees.

On his conveying their assent I administered the Five Precepts and thereafter I again asked whether they would listen to the Karaniya Metta Sutta. With their consent I recited the sutta. Again I asked whether they would like to listen to the Mangala Sutta and I recited the sutta when they gave their consent.

When I again asked whether they would listen to the Ratana Sutta, this time the dying man waved his hand to signify that the heavenly beings were not willing to listen to this sutta. He thereupon told me that the devas wanted me to go back to my vihara.

I then realized that the devas were getting impatient to take him to heaven, but I wanted to intercede and prolong his life on this earth. I told the dying man to tell the devas to depart as it was not yet time for his death. As he was only fifty-six years of age, I was sure the devas had come to take him to heaven by mistake. I myself and all others present there were ready to transfer our merits to the devas in exchange for which we would beg them to spare his life.

I again asked the dying man whether any other vision was present. He replied that his parents were still lingering on under the Bodhi Tree. This could have but one meaning, namely, that the pull from the human world was still very strong on him and he would be reborn as a human being. Again I suggested that we all offer our accumulated merits to his departed parents, in exchange for which they should take their leave, just as the devas had done.

From the indication made by the dying man it seemed that his father was willing to accede to my request but not his mother. I expressed resentment at this intransigence on the part of the mother and through the dying man excitedly told his parents that when the devas had agreed to heed my request, it was quite improper for them to refuse. This sort of conduct, I said, could cause them harm. I had to repeat this remonstrance several times, and at last it produced the desired effect. The parents, I could gather, had at last taken their leave.

Now that all the visions that had appeared to the dying man were gone, a visible change came over him. He took a deep breath and again showed signs of vitality. When one of his relatives came near him with a lamp in hand to take a close look at him, he exclaimed, "Don't worry any more, I am not going to die." When we saw the dying man coming to life again, a wave of joy and relief passed over all of us.

We all felt overwhelmed by this unprecedented scene, which had unfolded in a kaleidoscopic manner. It was then five o'clock in the morning. Everyone present had passed the entire night without sleep, but strangely no one showed any sign of exhaustion, so absorbing and thrilling had the incident been. I then took my leave, went back to my vihara, took a bath, had breakfast, and went to bed to take a nap.

At about 10:30 A.M. I heard a sound outside my room. On coming out I saw the same gentleman who had come to fetch me the evening before. I asked him why he had returned. He told me that he had come to fetch me again as Mr. Chowdhury, after passing some five hours in a good condition, had developed signs of complete exhaustion and his end appeared to have come.

I quickly returned to the house of Mr. Chowdhury in the company of the gentleman. I found long treks of villagers going in the same direction, and when I reached the house it was overflowing with the crowds of people who had gathered there on hearing of the unprecedented events of the night before. All made way for me to reach the bedside of the dying man.

I took my seat by the dying man's bedside and asked him how he was feeling. He feebly replied that he could not survive any longer. I gave him words of encouragement and urged him to remember the good deeds he had done in his life. I occasionally asked him whether he had any vision before him, but each time the reply was "No."

It was then 11:20 A.M. and one of his relations, Mr. Mahendra Chowdhury, who was an old man of 86, realizing that the time for my last meal of the day would soon be over, asked me to have my meal. I told him, with some vehemence, that I could not possibly leave the side of the dying man at that moment, even for my meal.

This created a tense situation, as all the crowd that had assembled there were feverishly awaiting to see the trend of events that might follow. I again asked the dying man whether he was having any vision. This time he said, "Yes, they have come again, the devas in the chariot."

The appearance of the devas at that stage, when I insisted on staying at the dying man's bedside after refusing my last meal of the day, intrigued me for a long time. Later, when I asked the Venerable Jnanishwar Mahathera and the Venerable Silalankar Mahathera to clarify this matter, they both told me that the devas must have been waiting for me to depart for my meal; then in my absence, they would take the dying man away to heaven. But when they found that I insisted on staying at the dying man's bedside, they at last arrived to take him away.

The dying man then told me that the devas were imploring me to go back to my vihara, and they were insistent on this. Asking myself why, I realized that this hesitancy of the devas to take away the dying man from my presence must be due to their obligation to me for giving them the Five Precepts and reciting the suttas for them. I later got confirmation of my conviction on this point from the Venerable Mahatheras when I related the incident to them.

As I felt that his death was inevitable, I asked him to tell the devas, "You can take him away from my presence. I have no objection to your doing so. I most gladly give him permission to leave us." This I did because he was going to the region of the devas, to which he was entitled by virtue of his merits and which I sincerely wished for him. I

next asked his wife and his other near relations to bid him a glad farewell, which they all did.

The stage was now set for his final departure for the next world. He took his last leave from all of us with the words, "I am going now." Those were the last words uttered by the dying man. His face was bright and full of beatitude.

Thereafter, I took hold of his head and shoulders on the one end, and asked another man to get hold of his legs. We stretched him flat on his back and I poured a few drops of sweet water into his mouth. Then I placed my right hand on his chest. I felt it to be quite warm. The dying man, as I had guessed, was still conscious and seemed to be muttering to himself the devotional phrases that he used to recite throughout his life.

Thereafter, he lifted his right hand with great effort and moved it in a way which suggested that he was seeking for something. I could not make out what he wanted. Someone in the crowd suggested he might be trying to touch my feet, which the previous night, too, he had occasionally done.

I then moved my right foot closer so he could touch it with his outstretched hand. The touch seemed to bring him great satisfaction, as could be seen from the expression on his face. He next touched his forehead with that hand and then placed the hand straight by his side.

I felt the warmth in his chest gradually decreasing. After a minute or two he gave a sudden jerk with his body and breathed his last. Thereafter he became still. When the body was quite cool I withdrew my hand from his chest and looked around. I saw everyone either sitting or standing quite calmly.

No one wept nor were there any sounds of lamentation coming from any quarter. This was a fitting final farewell to a dying man, quite in conformity with the instructions I had given my devotees in the course of my discourses on religious matters. I then left the house, telling the relatives and friends of the dead person to weep or lament if they liked, as at that point such lamentations could no longer have any effect on the dead person.

This incident at long last put an end to whatever doubts I might previously have had about the veracity of the verse relating to the appearance of the five visions, which had been told to me by the Venerable Jnanishwar Mahathera and which I had also read about in the scriptures. Later, when I turned my analytical mind to the case of the dying man, I found that at every stage the *nimittas* (visions) had appeared in accordance with the state of his mind (*citta*).

The sight of the Bodhi Tree and of his deceased parents were the results of his *kamma nimitta*, that is, the predominant factor which prevailed in his consciousness due to the force of the actions done by him in his present life. But when, at intervals, he saw the vision of a hairy person or pigeons or fearful demons, those were the signs when his mind was temporarily overcome by worldly clingings or by recollections of bad deeds done by him during his life.

The recital of the suttas drove away the evil thoughts and consequently the apparitions disappeared. The purification of the mind that took place by hearing the suttas and

taking the Five Precepts made the appearance of the devas possible. Until the end, this state of mind was more powerful than any other. It was even more powerful than the lingering vision of his parents, which had to disappear for the way to be made absolutely clear for the dying man to go to the heavenly region after his passing away from this world.

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The conclusion that one can draw from this incident is that the last moment in the life of a person determines whether he will be reborn in a higher plane of existence or in a lower one. It is therefore the duty of all well-wishers of a dying person to pacify his mind by reminding him of the good deeds he had done in this life and by reciting suttas and *gathas*. One should not cloud his mind by weeping or lamentation or by drawing his mind to worldly affairs.

It is also my understanding that however pious or devoted a person might be, no amount of good deeds on his part can bring him ultimate deliverance or enable him to realize Nibbana, the supreme goal of life. Good deeds can only lead to rebirth in happy planes of existence in the next world, the highest being the Brahma-world. It is only through the practice of insight meditation (*vipassana-bhavana*) that one can overcome the ten fetters (*dasa samyojana*) and attain the four stages of liberation: *sotapatti* (stream-entry), *sakadagami* (once-returning), *anagami* (non-returning), and *arahatta* (full liberation).

Of the ten fetters, the first three, namely, self-delusion (*sakkaya-ditthi*), doubt (*vicikiccha*), and clinging to mere rule and ritual (*silabbata-paramasa*), can be overcome by attaining the first stage of sanctification, stream-entry. A person who has attained this stage will not take birth in the nether worlds—hell (*niraya*), ghost (*peta*), and animal (*tiracchana*), realms—and will not be reborn more than seven times; for them, no vision of the three nether worlds will appear at the time of death. They may have the visions only of the human world or the celestial realms.

A person who makes further progress in meditation and reaches the stage of once-returner by subduing the fourth and fifth fetters, namely, sensual lust (*kamaraga*) and ill-will (*patigha*), will be reborn once more only. For them too the first three visions will not appear, but only one of the two happy visions will appear before death.

A person who has attained the stage of non-returner through the pursuit of further meditation, by completely annihilating the former two fetters, namely, sensual lust and ill-will, will not be reborn again in this world but will be reborn in the Brahma-world, from which he will attain final deliverance. Such a one will have only one vision, namely, that of the devas.

After attaining this stage, through the pursuit of further meditation a person attains the stage of arahantship by annihilating the remaining five fetters, namely, greed for fine-material existence (*rupa-raga*), greed for immaterial existence (*arupa-raga*), conceit (*mana*), restlessness (*uddhacca*), and ignorance (*avijja*). Such a person will not be born again as he has attained final deliverance, and thus no vision of any kind can appear before him at the moment of death.

Nibbana is the final goal of life discovered by the Buddha. This discovery was made by him through personal experience by the practice of meditation. His true followers are those who tread the path indicated by him, and it is only through the pursuit of meditation that the final goal of Nibbana can be attained here in this world. The visions can only serve as light posts in the labyrinth of human existence, sometimes dark, some times bright. But the final goal of life, the true light, lies ultimately in the attainment of Nibbana, which one can reach by stages through the pursuit of insight meditation

About the Author

Ven. Rastrapal Mahathera is the chief incumbent and meditation master at the International Meditation Centre at Bodh Gaya.

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