

Mysticism – an Impulse for Ritualizing Death

Explorations of Christian and Buddhist Monastic Practices and Beliefs

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1. Introduction

Spirituality can serve as a strong impulse for the process of ritualizing.¹ When there are less given rites that everyone can participate in from a plausible symbolic frame of reference, experiential processes can help people to be engaged. Intense experiences of spiritual practice and meaning form a source for rituals, which emerge inside and outside religious traditions. This means that spirituality can be a source for a process of enacting passages that form an important complementary impulse towards traditional ritual repertoires.² Especially when it comes to death, spiritual witnesses are numerous. In dying narratives of holy persons, several traditions depict a mystical means of experiencing death. Ritualizing death can mean (re)inventing practices of spirituality. Spiritual models of dying are then enacted in a ritual setting.³ When confronted with dying, death and disposal, ritual participants experience an existential relation with an ultimate reality which can be interpreted as spiritual transformation, following the great paths of holy men and women. This transformation is a source of meaning-making when crossing the border of death: both leaving behind a former stage of life and entering a future are mysterious for the persons concerned and involve manifold practices and beliefs. Contingency transcends the comprehensible realm of planning one's life. Finitude is the most obvious limitation of human existence. A fulfilled life lived or not, it is unavoidable that human life ends, at least in a biological sense, and this urges ritual participants to search for practices and beliefs transcending the border of death.⁴ Spiritual traditions help to receive the impulse needed for personally coping with death.

All spiritual traditions accompany the inevitability of dying and death by offering perspectives that reach beyond this obvious end of physical life, particularly in narratives. The process of dying, death and mourning is a transformation for both the dying and the bereaved. Dying not only means saying

¹ This article is based on a lecture held at the symposium 'Ritual symbols of life, death and afterlife', 28 October 2015, at Radboud University Nijmegen, organised by IRiLiS and the *Centre for Thanatology*.

² Cf. R. GRIMES: *Deeply into the Bone. Re-inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley 2010) 18.

³ Th. QUARTIER: *Die Grenze des Todes. Ritualisierte Religiosität im Umgang mit den Toten* (= Death Studies 2) (Münster 2011) 11-15.

⁴ K. WAAIJMAN: *Spirituality. Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Leuven 2002) 1.

farewell, but at the same time, “the dying process is approached as a moment of transformation and opportunity for growth”.⁵ When rituals accompany this transformation-process, the experiences of participants are inspired by beliefs, sometimes vague and unarticulated. For this reason, rituals can be based on condensed experiences submitted in ritual tradition which express in a symbolic manner what cannot be articulated solely based in one’s cognitive experience. Traditions offer practices to prepare for the transformation and give space to existential involvement; and they contain beliefs which impart meaning to the process of dying. Ritualizing death means to be inspired by practices of spirituality and a symbolic meaning, often in the sense of a hereafter. Both, practices within a ritualized process and beliefs inspired by traditional narratives, are spiritually relevant, as they lead dying and bereaved persons to ‘contrast experience’ at the border of death: ritualizing the end of worldly life offers a glimpse of the mystery of life, death and a possible afterlife.⁶

However, in modern society it has become less evident how these traditional practices and beliefs relate to a person’s own death or that of a beloved one. The potential sense-giving perspective on death has become progressively problematic for two reasons. First, due to increasing medical knowledge and treatment possibilities, the border of death seems to be less of a mystery to the contemporary terminally ill and their loved ones. Second, due to secularization the articulation of the mystical dimensions of death, funeral and mourning by spiritual practices and symbolic meaning seems to have become more difficult, leading to a lack of a spiritual repertoire for many people with no explicit religious affiliation. Which practices help to cope with the border of death? Which beliefs can articulate the mystery surrounding death?

These questions direct us to the relation of ritualizing death and spirituality, again, more specifically the dimension of spirituality that evokes transformation of human identity for those who are facing death. This dimension is explicitly realized in mysticism. Mysticism in this regard refers to the path of a person towards a transcendent reality not perceivable by the senses or human knowledge. It is common to mystical traditions, as defined by the Dutch spirituality scholar Hein Blommestijn, that “the consciousness of the person is transformed, not because of a different content, but because the center of gravity of a person’s personality is gradually moved towards the divine”.⁷ Death is a focal point during the circle of life that evokes a need and offers an occasion for mystical experience. This understanding of a possible mysticism of death is a broad one, but still has a clear focus: the transformation that is central to all spiritual processes, means that the whole existence of humans is transformed beyond death. However, the question is whether the loss of personality con-

⁵ Th. CATTOI & C. MOREMAN: *Death, Dying, and Mysticism* (New York 2015) 2.

⁶ E. SCHILLEBEECKX: *The Human Story of God* (Spring Valley 1993).

⁷ H. BLOMMESTIJN: ‘Progrès – progressants’, in *Dictionnaire spiritualité ascétique et mystique* 12 (1986) 2383-2405, p. 2384.

nected to mysticism can be reconciled in a culture directed at a person's individual personality as an ultimate value.

Against this background, contemporary death rituals often stress the continuity between earthly life and life after death. Many dying persons do not prepare for their self-loss anymore, as they do within most religious traditions, but rather create their 'post-self': their ongoing identity here on earth among their significant others.⁸ For the bereaved, this means that through the 'continuing bonds'⁹ with their loved ones, they do not let them go in an impersonalized way, but attempt to retain contact and communicate with the dead, especially in mourning rituals.¹⁰ Despite this tendency, the experience of loss remains disturbing for human thought. For this reason, the relationship between death and mysticism is important, especially in contemporary society where there is once again a growing awareness of death and its spiritual meaning.¹¹ It seems promising to explore mysticism as an impulse for ritualizing death, because mystic experience and tradition might offer an important view of the spiritual transformation connected with death within the process of ritualizing.

To get an appropriate view of the mystical dimensions of death rituals, three elements of the experiences of dying and bereaved persons are key for their spiritual transformation: first, practices directed to death, second, beliefs of (after-) life, often symbolically expressed, and third, mystagogical guidance of the transformation. To investigate mysticism as a source for ritualization, it is important to select examples of spiritual traditions that can be hermeneutically linked to contemporary experiences in death rituals: depicting paradigmatic beliefs and offering models for ritualizing. In this article, I concentrate on monastic practices and beliefs of life, death and afterlife from two traditions: Buddhism and Christianity. Monastic ways of life and dying narratives of holy persons are not representative for spiritual traditions, but offer a paradigmatic picture of spiritual practices and beliefs. Buddhist and Christian monks both can offer sources for reflection on mystical experience. Choosing these traditions does not imply that other religions or worldviews do not offer practices, beliefs or models of guidance directed to the mystical experience of ritualizing death. On the contrary, it is common to all spiritual traditions to show mystical paths towards and through death.¹² Concentrating on these two is a pragmatic choice in a Western European context, as both traditions serve as a source of

⁸ J. WOJTKOWIAK: "I'm dead, therefore I am". *The postself and notions of immortality in contemporary Dutch society* (Nijmegen 2012) (PHD thesis).

⁹ Cf. the article of A. Kjærsgaard & E. Venbrux in this volume.

¹⁰ D. KLASS & T. WALTER: 'Processes of Grieving: How Bonds are Continued', in: M. STROEBE [et al.] (eds.): *Handbook of Bereavement Research: Consequence, Coping, and Care* (Washington DC 2001).

¹¹ L. BREGMAN: *Death and Dying, Spirituality and Religions: A Study of the Death Awareness Movement* (= American University Studies 228) (Washington 2003).

¹² CATTOI & MOREMAN: *Death, Dying, and Mysticism*.

inspiration for people with and without religious affiliation.¹³ For a contemporary understanding of mysticism and its role for ritualizing death, I wish to offer a hermeneutical investigation of spiritual traditions from a comparative angle, based on an associative way of understanding transformation inside and outside a spiritual context.¹⁴ This can be illustrated by the two perspectives of selected aspects of Christian and Buddhist monastic spirituality that show many parallels when considering the practices and beliefs in death rituals.¹⁵ The central question is: What spiritual practices and beliefs found in monastic dying narratives can serve as an impulse for mystagogical guidance of people ritualizing death? To answer this question, I will first clarify the relation between mysticism and the process of ritual transformation more precisely (2). Then, I give some impressions of Christian and Buddhist monastic spirituality with regard to their practices representing spiritual transformations of the dying, without pretending to give a complete overview (3). This is followed by two examples of monastic dying-narratives, Benedict of Nursia and the Buddha, that offer beliefs from mystical experiences of death (4). Finally, a possible perspective for mystagogical guidance of death rituals will be shown from Christian and Buddhist practice. How can this contribute to ritualizing death and benefit spiritual transformation (5)? With these explorations I hope to clarify the complex relationship between spirituality and death rituals, without of course fully exploring the traditions mentioned.

2. Mysticism and ritual transformation

Ritualizing death enacts the transformation process that is at stake when a physical life ends. Before we come to our investigation of dying narratives of holy persons, we first have to elaborate on the general relation between mysticism and ritual transformation to detect more specific sub-questions. Reflection on this ritual transformation relies on different disciplines, such as cultural anthropology, religious studies and theology. Certain aspects of the ritual process accompanying death, funeral and mourning are analyzed regarding their visible structure and meaning. However, it is also possible to see the underlying experience of the mystery in death ritual as a source of wisdom. The study of death ritual is then broadened out to include hermetic content only accessible to persons directly involved: the dying and the mourning who experience the rituals conducted in a spiritual way. The relationship between internal and the external

¹³ P. VAN DER VELDE: *De oude Boeddha in een nieuwe wereld. Verkenningen in de westerse dharma* (Nijmegen 2015).

¹⁴ Th. QUARTIER: 'Kontemplation als Zeugnis des Leidens. Inter-spirituellem Dialog mit dem engagierten Buddhismus', in *Acta Comparanda* 26 (2015) 35-44.

¹⁵ P. HENRY (ed.): *Benedict's Dharma. Buddhists Reflect on the Rule of Saint Benedict* (London 2002).

perspectives is evident here; the outsider can only rely on external signals given by those directly involved and can never fully share the mystical experience. The groups closest to the dying are caregivers and loved ones who can share the experience in the intimate setting of rituals conducted in physical or spiritual care. According to many experiences, during the last days before death, ritual moments can occur that are enormously rich because death is contemplated openly. Between the moment of diagnosis and the moment of death, ‘a world can open up’, as one can learn from spirituality studies.¹⁶ What is meant by this world opening up? This is particularly difficult to articulate because there is often no immediate vocabulary available to describe the deeply personal and intimate experience. The rituals can play an important role in that articulation, as they provide a symbolic repertoire.

Beyond verbal articulation

Words accompanying transformative moments around death quickly risk not being recognized by the dying, their loved ones or the caregivers in attendance. The strength of ritual repertoires is to transcend the merely rational level of describing human experience. This means that rituals offer a symbolic rupture that can unite the hermetic experience of the dying with the emotions of loved ones and with traditional meaning systems. However, if the symbols are too strongly determined by meaning systems not shared by all the persons involved in a dying process, they can quickly become hieratic and inaccessible. As soon as they are fully recognized, the risk is that they are too immanent, become trivial and do not access the world opening up in the face of death.¹⁷ The issue of finding a suitable repertoire is common to all ritual environments. Consider for example traditional Muslim society. Surah's from the Koran recited at a deathbed can have a symbolic function. To keep them ritually open, it is important to leave enough space for the actual experience of the dying person and not use a closed frame of meaning that is hieratic. On the other hand, you cannot rely on common recitations that might not do justice to the concrete situation.¹⁸ Ritual counselling can help in these situations to respect the mystical experience of death, avoiding hieratism and trivialization.

When analyzing the process of ritualizing death, it makes sense to include a mystical analysis to do justice to the richness of the dying process and to offer a key to suitable repertoires. Why? The reason is sourced in mysticism's original meaning, which is related to the Greek *myo* (closing of eyes and mouth) and *myeo* (being initiated in the mysteries). The adjective *mysticos* describes someone

¹⁶ WAAIJMAN: *Spirituality* 110.

¹⁷ Th. QUARTIER: ‘Monastische Thanatologie. Lebens- und Todessymbolik in der Regula und Vita Benedicti und ihre Bedeutung für den modernen Kontext’, in *Studies in Spirituality* 22 (2012) 127-148.

¹⁸ C. VENHORST: ‘Lived eschatology. Muslim views on life and death’, in E. VENBRUX & Th. QUARTIER (eds.): *Changing European Death Ways* (Münster 2013) 259-281.

who has been initiated into the mysteries (*mystes*, *mystagogos*, *mystagogia*) about which they remain silent (*myo*). In this definition of mysticism three important dimensions can be distinguished.¹⁹ First, a process of growth and development often linked to ascetic exercises, secondly, a mystery that transcends language and human sensual perception, and lastly, the help of guides who lead the person along a mystagogical path. These three dimensions of mysticism are directly related to the elements mentioned previously: practices, beliefs, and mystagogical guidance. The following questions are relevant:

- which practices of spirituality help initiation into the mystery of death?
- which beliefs shed light on the experience of the mystery at death?
- what can mystagogical guidance add to the initiation in the mystery?

Spiritual resources

To find practices directed to death, spiritual ways of life form a relevant source, such as monasticism. Here the ritual repertoire that belongs to a particular spiritual tradition can be found in an intense representation by people who direct their whole life towards mystical experience, as already indicated in our introduction. This is, of course, not the case for everyone who ritualizes death today, but as a model it is relevant to all. What do monks do to lead a life already anticipating the border of death and who touch upon its mystery? The ritual patterns can be found in dying narratives of holy persons whom the followers perceive as having reached a supernatural state of being that reveals the mystery of death.²⁰ How do the saints die? What kind of beliefs do the rituals performed reveal for a mystical understanding of death? The mystagogical guidance of dying and bereaved persons evolves from the intimate experience shared with dying persons. The dying process of holy persons offers models for practices and beliefs that open the mystical meaning of death for this intimate relation. In the monastic traditions of Buddhism and Christianity, Saint Benedict and the Buddha are striking examples for a meaningful shared process. Their dying narratives are relevant impulses regarding the questions posed above. How these questions are answered depends on the spiritual tradition. Mystical experiences can mean the path of a person towards a transcendent reality. It can also mean the purification of human desire, directed to a person's true nature and away from self-fulfillment, or aimed at an intuition which differs from ordinary experience and is often linked to strong emotions. After a long period of neglecting death²¹, a growing awareness of the importance of experiencing and sharing the ritual processes surrounding death can be found today, including the mystical dimensions. The models are, of course, not representative for practitioners of Buddhism and Christianity. Their dying can only

¹⁹ WAAIJMAN: *Spirituality* 353-355.

²⁰ Th. QUARTIER: 'Memento mori. Liturgische Spiritualität, monastisches Totenritual und moderne Trauerkultur', in *Jaarboek voor Liturgieonderzoek* 28 (2012) 223-244.

²¹ P. ARIÈS: *The Hour of Our Death* (New York 1981).

be understood as a symbolic source for practice and belief that inspires guides and dying or bereaved persons. Still, this symbolic impact is vital when it comes to the attitude of attentiveness towards the other and openness towards the mystery of life, death and the afterlife. As already observed, every spiritual tradition offers practices and beliefs revealing the meaning of dying. The two traditions selected offer practices and beliefs for life, death and afterlife. In Christianity, the resurrection of Christ means the transition (*pascha*) from death to life. The death of Jesus is the immanent reality on this side of human perception, whereas on the other side is God's life giving power. This can be experienced in life by following Christ fully. It can also be expressed by paschal symbols in rituals during the process of dying. For this reason, funerary rites were transformed from the Hellenistic context by Christians: no glorification of the deceased, as participation in Christ's mystery is the most significant and not the earthly merits earned.²² The central motive of self-loss is linked to this motive of entering the salvation earned by Christ.

In Buddhism, the idea of reincarnation plays a central role. On the one hand it seems to differ from an image of the hereafter that requires self-loss. On the other hand, the ethical implications connected to reincarnation are also related to other images of an afterlife. Moreover, the final goal is to reach nirvana. For that reason, the symbolism of being reincarnated on your way to nirvana is also a symbolic way of leaving your present self behind. You can reach the transformation to nirvana even during your own lifetime, if you systematically leave behind everything related to the longing for life, the source of all suffering. Thus, self-loss is again of eminent importance. That mystical core can be arrived at in a concentrated way during the dying process by rituals of meditation. Meditatively you can reach different states of consciousness that leave earthly perception and personal identity behind. You can learn to see death as a natural process and accept it. This transformation of death to new life is not only linked to a general cosmological process, but also to the individual's cycle of life, death and new life again.²³ What are the significant practices for a mystical experience of death? What beliefs reveal the mystery of death more specifically? And how is mystagogical guidance of death rituals given in Buddhism and in Christianity? The following examples endeavor to clarify these questions.

3. Practices: anticipating death

Where is a mystical experience surrounding death actually enacted? As a first significant source of ritualizing death, we can look at practices anticipating your own death as they are performed in Christian and Buddhist monastic circles. They offer special ways of life that incorporate death in their very essence. Eve-

²² WAAIJMAN: *Spirituality* 102.

²³ WAAIJMAN: *Spirituality* 103.

ryday life is an anticipation of death for these groups of practitioners. The ritual repertoire includes practices that transform a human person towards a supernatural goal. Monks ritually live towards death in both traditions. What do the practices we find in monastic sources reveal about spirituality and death ritual? Before we go deeper into this question, it is important to first look at the models which come from monastic tradition.

Monks are ‘ascetic virtuosi’²⁴ who follow a special vocation to become sensitized to the mystery related to human finitude. For this reason, the life of Christian monks is often interpreted as not being located in the world as it is perceived to be. Monks are identified entirely with their way of life, consequently when entering the monastery, they ‘die’ for the world, at least as individual personalities.²⁵ Symbolically speaking, Buddhist monks can also be seen as ‘living dead’, especially in the Indian forms of monastic life; they extricate themselves from the limitations of time. In this regard, the monastery can be viewed as a ‘timeless world’ that follows its own set patterns quite separate from the world. A good example is the independence of biological age. The day of entering the monastery is decisive for the monk’s position within the community, not the date of birth, which differs from the convention in society. Entering the monastery is seen as ‘spiritual death’.²⁶ The ‘life’ of a monk can be a representation of ‘death’ for society. At the same time a monastery, Christian and Buddhist, is a place where a monk permanently copes with death. By not neglecting death, it becomes a natural goal of life incorporating a mystical search for what follows after death.

The motivation to strive for a life towards death is usually the hereafter. In Benedictine tradition, the oldest form of Western Christian monasticism, death has to be present in everyday life to avoid poor behavior. Any reward will follow death. The Rule of Saint Benedict says in the 6th century: “Live in fear of judgment day and have a great horror of hell. Yearn for everlasting life with holy desire. Day by day remind yourself that you are going to die” (RB 4,44-47). This is an anticipation of eternity that can never be reached by merely functional practices or by applying ascetical techniques. These techniques initiate monks, but it is only through grace that they can grasp a glimpse of eternity during their earthly life, which will be fully revealed after death. A major part of monastic engagement is prayer. This ritual pillar of monastic life is directed towards God and can benefit the living and the dead with regard to the eternal being. For this reason, during the Middle Ages monasteries were places of an intense ritual anticipation of death and life after death. Monks were also requested by many members of society to pray for the deceased. Why is this a particular task for monks? One possible explanation can be their mystical

²⁴ M. RIESEBRODT: *The Promise of Salvation. A Theory of Religion* (Chicago 2010).

²⁵ G. AGAMBEN: *The Highest Poverty. Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life* (Redwood City 2013).

²⁶ P. VAN DER VELDE: ‘Over my dead Buddha! Death and Buddhism’, in E. VENBRUX, Th. QUARTIER (eds.): *Changing European Death Ways* (= Death Studies 1) (Münster 2013) 239-258.

openness towards eternal life. Their practices are fruitful for the salvation of all people, within and beyond the monastery. Logic can never form the basis for the trust in the mystical quality of monastic life with regard to the border of death. A basic sense for the mystery is formed by ascetic practices and by prayer.

In Buddhism, many texts remind the disciples of the Buddha of the transitory nature of embodiment: “Now that you know that the body is riddled with disease, how can you rely on force? The world has no essence, it is unhealthy and unsure; forces in a world that is so temporary, will perish.”²⁷ When monks are seen as ‘living dead’, as previously indicated, this is due to their outer appearance, as Van der Velde points out: “Their head is shaved, their garments originally consisted of shrouds or other cloth found in cremation grounds, closely imitating the Buddha.”²⁸ The monastic way of life, similar to Benedictine spirituality, is an anticipation of death. It is a mystery why humans would act as if dead during their life time. As with Christianity, monks are predestined to benefit the living as well as the dead who did not lead an ascetic life with regard to their afterlife. You can improve your karma by donating to monks. As they sometimes can enter the various hells belonging to Buddhist eschatological images during their meditation, they are perceived as representatives of death and asked to guide persons on their way through physical death, for example by presiding over funerals, particularly in Japan.

The relevance of leading a life that is already touching on the mystery of death is visible when the need for rituals accompanying death comes up in private or public life. Think about areas where monasteries form stable centers of meditating on death and accepting physical death as a part of life and not disturbing the spiritual path. Remaining stable in anticipating death can be a strong impulse against injustice, directing people to their ultimate goal of life whilst being independent of earthly conflicts and catastrophes.²⁹ Next to that, it can be a source of inspiration for all people who are facing the border of death, to include the practices lived out by monks in their own ways of ritualizing their relation with death, albeit in a modified way. The forms of monastic life demonstrate that mysticism can be an impulse for ritualizing death in three ways:

- death can be anticipated by ascetic practices during life;
- the anticipation of death is linked with a mystical search for the hereafter;
- persons not committed to a religious way of life can benefit from practices anticipating death.

²⁷ *Saundarananda* IX, 16, quoted in VAN DER VELDE: ‘Over my dead Buddha’ 242-243.

²⁸ VAN DER VELDE: ‘Over my dead Buddha’ 241.

²⁹ Th. QUARTIER: ‘Monastic martyrs of compassion. Murdered Trappist monks in Algeria and the different meanings of martyrdom’, in *Mortality* 19 (2014) 224-242.

4. Beliefs: anticipating afterlife

Ritualizing not only accompanies the way we live, but also the way we actually die. Therefore, a second source for death rituals are beliefs emerging from experiences of the mystery of death in mystical tradition, again both in Buddhist and Christian monastic resources: dying narratives. Being initiated into a mystery not perceivable by the senses can be the culmination of a dying process. Obviously not every dying person bears witness to this process in an articulated manner. For this reason, it can be perceived as a problem in contemporary society to find an appropriate vocabulary in their death rituals. As traditional liturgical language is often detached from people's personal experience, mystical death narratives might offer a more experiential language expressing beliefs for rituals crossing the border of death, anticipating a possible afterlife. Dying narratives of holy persons can be found in every spiritual tradition. They are on the one hand part of the hagiography of the persons, stressing their qualities and holiness. On the other hand they often offer a symbolic meaning, which can be inspiring and transformative for listeners and readers for example during the rituals of their own death process or that of a loved one.³⁰ Dying-narratives in Christianity and Buddhism illustrate the mystical dimension of the dying process by showing experiences of a mystery that could not be expressed in purely discursive argumentation. In both traditions, the mystery of life after death becomes a symbolic reality in the narratives of the holy persons who inspire monks in their spiritual life, which makes them a rich impulse for ritualizing death.

What are the mystical dimensions of Buddhist and Christian monks aiming at in dying-narratives? What kind of beliefs anticipate an afterlife in one sense or the other emerge from their experiences? In Buddhism, human experience of dying and death is taken seriously, even by the Buddha himself. Narratives seek to avoid people being alienated from the mystery by their perceptions, feelings and experiences. All illusions need to be removed from the dying person, so he or she is able to be fully receptive for nothingness.³¹ The nothingness is probably not what most people would expect as belief, but it reveals openness for the future after one has crossed the border of death. We have to mention here that the Buddha himself remained silent about an afterlife. However, it is exactly the openness realized in his own death that implicitly transcends the border of death. This openness is what a dying-narrative can express for anyone confronted with death. The mystery is initiated when dying is in a literal sense empty; an emptiness that we in our usual state of mind cannot grasp. The mysticism of the Buddha would not be called mysticism by many practitioners and schol-

³⁰ W. LABOV: *The Language of Life and Death: The Transformation of Experience in Oral Narrative* (Cambridge 2013).

³¹ R. HEINRICH: *Leben in Religionen, Religionen im Leben. Interreligiöse Spuren* (= Interreligiöse Begegnungen Bd. 1) (Münster 2005) 153.

ars, but still we find it in the Buddha's meditating practice used throughout his life and intensively in his death.

A comparable path to the mystery can be found in Christian mysticism of dying. Dying is seen as the final process of self-loss, whereas in life people are all too often directed towards their own ego. Of course there is a major difference: nothingness is not the goal of the path but God. Christianity, like the other Abrahamic traditions, offers an attitude to be receptive for the Other.³² In Christianity, it is God who is expressed in dying-narratives. When truly independent of yourself, God reveals the mystery of eternal life.³³ Both traditions therefore have different images of personal eschatology: what happens to human being after death. The beliefs of reincarnation and nirvana differ strongly from theological concepts such as the resurrection or the immortal soul. However, the process of self-loss is common to both traditions, Christianity and Buddhism. It is not our aim here to compare the more systematic implications of these images, however we wish to illustrate how the process of dying can be a source of different types of images which can be linked to mystical experience. Mystical experience in this respect offers a contemplative horizon that can be a source for different eschatological beliefs, articulated or more implicit, but which in both cases transcend the border of death and are an impulse for ritualizing death. Two narratives can illustrate this importance, the first one about the Buddha, the second one about Saint Benedict.

Buddha

From the Buddhist tradition, the dying-narrative of the Buddha is a striking example. It is described in detail in the *Maha-parinibbana Sutta*, written several centuries after the Buddha's actual death. After the description of several months of retreat, the narrative describes the Buddha dying, the cremation and the division of the relics.³⁴ In a mystical sense, the narrated dying process is enacted ritually in all its stages. Although the Buddha was already enlightened during his earthly life, he still needed to die, as everything that has a beginning also has an end. In the process he runs through the stages he had already passed several times during his life, anticipating death (compare section 3). Still, his death was not an usual death, as the disciples in his immediate vicinity desired to know what would happen to the Buddha at the boundary of death. It is interesting to read that the whole meditative journey can be observed during the last moments of his earthly life, starting with several meditative stages until the sphere of nothingness is reached. The whole spectrum of ritual experiences is expressed in a condensed way. The relevant passage reads:

³² L. FREEMAN: *Jesus: the Teacher Within* (London 2010).

³³ D. SÖLLE: *Mystik des Todes* (Freiburg i.Br. 2011) 21.

³⁴ E. THOMAS: *The History of Buddhist Thought* (New York 1996).

(9) And the Blessed One entered the first jhana [state of meditation in Buddhism]. Rising from the first jhana, he entered the second jhana. Rising from the second jhana, he entered the third jhana. Rising from the third jhana, he entered the fourth jhana. And rising out of the fourth jhana he entered the sphere of infinite space. Rising from the attainment of the sphere of infinite space, he entered the sphere of infinite consciousness. Rising from the attainment of the sphere of infinite consciousness, he entered the sphere of nothingness. Rising from the attainment of the sphere of nothingness, he entered the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. And rising out of the attainment of the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, he attained to the cessation of perception and feeling.

(10) And the Venerable Ananda spoke to the Venerable Anuruddha, saying: 'Venerable Anuruddha, the Blessed One has passed away.' 'No, friend Ananda, the Blessed One has not passed away. He has entered the state of the cessation of perception and feeling.'

(11) Then the Blessed One, rising from the cessation of perception and feeling, entered the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception. Rising from the attainment of the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception, he entered the sphere of nothingness. Rising from the attainment of the sphere of nothingness, he entered the sphere of infinite consciousness. Rising from the attainment of the sphere of infinite consciousness, he entered the sphere of infinite space. Rising from the attainment of the sphere of infinite space, he entered the fourth jhana. Rising from the fourth jhana, he entered the third jhana. Rising from the third jhana, he entered the second jhana. Rising from the second jhana, he entered the first jhana. Rising from the first jhana, he entered the second jhana. Rising from the second jhana, he entered the third jhana. Rising from the third jhana, he entered the fourth jhana. And, rising from the fourth jhana, the Blessed One immediately passed away.³⁵

Four elements are remarkable in this narrative. First, during his dying process, the Buddha passes the stages of spiritual growth that you would aim at on a spiritual path; second, he actually does achieve the highest mystery; third, he returns to earlier stages of the spiritual path; fourth, the stages can be perceived by the disciples surrounding him, they are ritually graspable. These elements point to the mystical nature of the Buddha's dying process. The initiation in the mystery happens in a compressed manner, and the mystery reached by the enlightened dying person is nothingness; not graspable by logic and/or reason. Still, it is related to earthly life, the practices and also the beliefs were present in the earlier stages of the Buddha's life, and the beliefs are not expressed verbally but lived out. The cyclical nature of life is symbolically expressed by the return to the lower stages of consciousness. Of course, the disciples do not attempt to guide the Buddha, as would be the case in spiritual care. The role of guide and follower is reversed here: the dying teacher guides the disciples, and this is expressed by the notion that they can perceive his journey. In a mystical sense the

³⁵ Access to Insight, 'Maha-parinibbana Sutta: Last Days of the Buddha.' Digha Nikaya 16, translated from the Pali by Sister Vajira & Francis Story (2013), chapter 6. <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.16.1-6.vaji.html>.

narrative indicates that the border of death remains a mystery, even after the final stage within the symbolic frame of reference, here the ‘sphere of nothingness’, is reached. The disciples can relate to the relics of the Buddha and participate in the symbolic expression of his mystical journey because he has also pointed to the way back. This is already an impulse for ritualizing death with the beliefs articulated in the various stages.

Saint Benedict

Within the Christian monastic tradition, the death of many saints is carefully described in hagiographic writings. One striking example is the death of Benedict of Nursia narrated by Gregory the Great (540-604) some decades after his actual death.³⁶ For Western monasticism he stressed the coenobite life (monks living together in a community) and consequently dies among the community of brothers. The fact that the saint is aware of his death can be found several times in early Christian monastic literature. However, that he dies standing is unique in this genre. A final stage of the mystical path is revealed. Benedict suffers bodily pain, but by drawing strength from his brethren and the Christian sacrament of Holy Communion, seen as sustenance for his journey (*viaticum*), he eventually reaches the realms of heaven. The ritualization is not only located in this liturgical act, but rather the whole process functions as a rite of passage. The relevant passage:

Six days before his death, he commanded that his grave be opened. Soon he was gripped with fever, and was exhausted by its burning heat. He became weaker as the days went by, and on the sixth day he had his disciples carry him into the oratory. There he fortified himself for death by receiving the Body and Blood of the Lord. Then, with his weak body held up by his disciples, he stood with his hands raised toward heaven and breathed forth his last as he prayed. Now, on that same day, an identical vision of him was granted to two of the brothers, one of whom was staying in the monastery and the other at a distance. They saw a carpeted street brilliant with countless lamps. It led from the east side of his monastery straight to heaven. Standing on it was an old man in shining garments who asked them if they knew whose path it was they were looking at. But they told him they did not know. He said to them: ‘This is the path on which Benedict, beloved of the Lord, will make his way up to heaven. Thus they who were absent understood from the sign given them that the holy man had died. They did so, just as the disciples who were present saw it with their own eyes (VB 37,2-4).

The parallels with the death of the Buddha are obvious: first, the actual dying brings the saint close to the mystery by practicing faith, which means community life and Christian sacraments; second, the path to heaven is ultimately reached. The Christian imagery of heaven and the path towards it echoes the ‘nothingness’ in the dying scene of the Buddha. Again, the symbolic meaning of

³⁶ M. PUZICHA: *Kommentar zur Vita Benedicti* (St. Ottilien 2012).

the life after death is expressed indirectly in this narrative (heaven), although the brothers see the path, they are not given a glimpse of heaven, nor do they observe the saint in heaven. This is the third element, the perception during his earthly life is purely directed to the body that becomes an earthly representation for the path to eternal life. Then an intermediate (the old man) helps to explain the symbols they see (street, lamps etc.). Again, the dying person is not counselled here in a mystagogical sense, but the beloved ones who are left behind receive mystical meaning. The differences between the two narratives reflect a different perception of time in the two traditions, as well as a variant understanding of transcendence and the Divine. Yet, four parallel features can be distilled:

- dying towards an afterlife can be interpreted as spiritual growth;
- mystery is reached by the dying person;
- the experience is linked to earthly reality.

5. Mystagogical guidance and death rituals

What does the impulse of mysticism in Buddhist and Christian monastic sources mean for contemporary practitioners? To understand how the practices (3) and beliefs (4) we detected relate to the experiences and needs of persons confronted with death today, we choose a dialogical model: spiritual guidance. How can the perspective of spiritual guidance help dying persons and their beloved ones to accompany their confrontation with the border of death with practices that anticipate a meaningful death? How can mysticism offer beliefs to persons who have lost a significant other that do not restrict their mourning process but instead offer inspiration? And what meaning can ritual guides and spiritual counsellors have in a situation of saying farewell, loss and mourning? We have investigated two traditions: Buddhist and Christian monastic sources. We have not aimed at giving an overview of the practices and beliefs in these traditions, but rather presented examples experienced as spiritually rich. In both traditions, practices anticipating death and beliefs anticipating a possible afterlife can be found. Those surrounding the monks or the holy persons involved find support and strength in their confrontation with finitude.

Modern forms of spiritual care often search for practices that offer a structure in the sometimes chaotic situation of people confronted with death, helping them to deal with their contingency. Furthermore, you search for a way of articulating the experiencing of mystery; beliefs that are open enough to unlock what we call a mystagogical perspective: initiating people into the mystery. This perspective can allow caregivers to help the dying and bereaved persons to discover their own experiential involvement in the relation between death ritu-

als and spirituality.³⁷ It is not our task here to elaborate on a concrete form of ritualizing death. Examples from both traditions can be found in various books and manuals.³⁸ Here we just try to supply some general thoughts for further reflection in practical situations and research.

First, practices: the link between spiritual practices and care today is explicitly expressed in Engaged Buddhism. According to anthropologist and Zen teacher Joan Halifax, the call for a continuous mystical path towards and beyond death is central to Buddhist practice:

The Buddha taught that we should practice helping others while cultivating deep concentration, compassion, and wisdom. He further taught that enlightenment is not a mystical, transcendent experience, but an ongoing process, calling for three fundamental qualities: fearlessness, intimacy and transparency; and that suffering diminishes when confusion and fear transforms into openness and strength. [...] I discovered care giving as a path, and as a school for unlearning the patterns of resistance, so embedded in me and my culture. Giving care, I learned, also enjoins us to be still, to let go, listen, and be open to the unknown.³⁹

In the process of care, the dying person and the caregiver, professionals or loved ones, can progress along the path of mysticism in confrontation with death. This is not a path of a given dogma that can be simply taught as one single, fixed experience. “Being with dying”, according to Halifax, starts with “not knowing, bearing witness of the suffering (*duka*)” and being inspired for “loving action”.⁴⁰ The mystery of death can enrich life by acting in a peaceful way and shed a light on crossing the border of death. What does this practice from Buddhism mean for ritualizing death in the light of our explorations? In the first instance, we learn that it is possible to offer practices of life to a dying person. Ritualizing death is in that sense not separated from life, but it emerges from the enactment of a personal spiritual attitude in a concrete form of life.⁴¹ What is the spiritual form of life of caregivers today? This question is often neglected, both in educational programs for spiritual caregivers and among professionals. The examples observed from Buddhist and Christian monasticism form the basis of the spiritual involvement emphasized by Halifax. It would be worth investigating the spiritual practices of caregivers in their own life anticipating death, to be able to be with dying and their beloved ones with-

³⁷ Th. QUARTIER: ‘Deathbed Rituals. Roles of Spiritual Caregivers in Dutch Hospitals’, in *Mortality* 15 (2010) 107-121.

³⁸ Compare Th. QUARTIER: *Liturgische spiritualiteit. Benedictijnse impulsen* (Heeswijk 2016) 110-155.

³⁹ J. HALIFAX: *Being With Dying: Cultivating Compassion and Fearlessness in the Presence of Death* (Boston 2009) 4.

⁴⁰ HALIFAX: *Being with Dying* XV-XVI.

⁴¹ R. GRIMES: *Deeply into the Bone. Re-inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley 2000) 18.

out fear. This implies a contemplative basis for their work, combined with active support of people confronted with the border of death.

Second, beliefs: the combination of contemplation and action is also typical for what in Christian spirituality is termed mystagogical. According to Waaijman, three steps are important for mystagogical counselling: first, tearing down the limitations of human receptiveness for the Divine; second, letting God be the principle of the will and the knowledge of the person; third, finding the person's particular place in the spiritual community.⁴² These three steps are reminders of the three principles mentioned by Halifax, although there is a major difference, too: in Christian mystagogy the Divine is articulated by the presence of Jesus Christ in life, whereas in Engaged Buddhism the emptiness of not knowing brings the human person to a personal, existential witness of the mystery of death. It is important to realize that we reach the realm of beliefs here. Mystagogy means to open the mystery for persons rather than explaining to them what the mystery is. What is the role of beliefs then? They are condensed expressions of experiences which carry the wisdom of a community, often centuries old. They help people to find their place in the spiritual community; the third aspect of mystagogical guidance. This is not a limitation of ritual creativity, but a prerequisite frame for ritualizing death aiming at spiritual transformation. Of course, this community can take on various forms in contemporary care. Mostly it will not be a fixed group or institution, perhaps even not a clearly defined tradition. Still, it is important that there is an open framework of beliefs that can help people confronted with the border of death to find their way towards the mystery when crossing the border of death.

We finish our exploration with three suggestions, based on the exploration of monastic practices and beliefs surrounding death in Buddhism and Christianity. What are possible guidelines for ritualizing death in contemporary Western society?

A first important lesson to learn from the process of spiritual transformation is the need to liberate those confronted with death from the bias towards its mystery. Ritualizing can open a space for experiencing the mystery of death without explaining it. Being with a dying person from a contemplative basis is an important ritualization that does not run the risks of being trivial or hieratic.

Second, a glimpse of the mystery can be found in ritualizing death, as it can put mystic experiences from various traditions into the scene. Suffering at the border of death can make it difficult for dying and/or bereaved persons to articulate their glimpses of eternity for themselves and for others. Mystical narratives can be paradigmatic and offer symbolic elements such as nothingness, light, God, etc.

Third, ritualizing death creates a community network of participants that enables them to share in each other's spiritual transformation. Of course, this

⁴² WAAIJMAN: *Spirituality* 580.

transformation is not the same for all the persons around a deathbed, attending a funeral or engaged in a mourning ritual, but still they can enrich each other, as the ritual presence of the persons involved opens the door towards their significant others. The caregiver simply being there helps them to find a ritual attitude at the border of death.

The caregiver is always directly involved in the ritualizing process, but does not necessarily preside over it. As spirituality offers practices and beliefs that can be performed by everyone, it can be enough to offer them and then take part. Of course, the dying narrative of the Buddha or Saint Benedict are not suitable and inspiring in every situation. The other beliefs anticipating afterlife and other basic ritual practices anticipating death can perhaps be helpful. The ones presented here are intended as striking examples. As Western societies do not have a dominant pattern of practices and beliefs surrounding death, the steps towards the mystery often remain unarticulated today. Mystical dimensions of various traditions, explicit or implicit, such as those represented by our monastic sources, can help caregivers to find practices and images to help the dying or bereaved to find a repertoire for the path that is finally directed towards crossing the border of death,⁴³ whilst relying on the mystical wisdom of spiritual sources.

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⁴³ Th. QUARTIER: 'Mourning rituals between faith and personalisation', in *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 10 (2010) 334-350.

