

Ling-In Lilian Chuu, MA
Humanities Division, Graduate
Institute of Medical Sciences, Taipei
Medical University

The Pursuit of a Good Death — An Approach from Pure Land Buddhism

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INTRODUCTION

In today's Taiwan, there is increasing concern with issues related to death. This concern is mainly reflected in 2 contemporary death awareness movements: the hospice movement and the establishment of death education. The idea of hospice care was introduced into Taiwan about 2 decades ago.¹ Its goal is to facilitate patients achieving a good death by improving the care given for a terminal illness and enhancing the quality of the dying's remaining life. Unlike mainstream medicine, which usually regards death as an enemy to fight against, hospice care perceives death as a natural course. Its principle is to neither hasten nor postpone death. Standing against the commonly accepted value of employing medical technological interventions to prolong the frail lives of terminally ill patients in hospitals, it argues that such interventions as the use of resuscitation and other life-sustaining treatments mostly cause great suffering to patients and merely prolong the dying process. Thus, instead of "curing", the service provided by hospice care emphasizes "caring", which means to deal with the different physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs of patients in a holistic manner to help them peacefully and solemnly pass through the final phase of their life.^{2,3} The ideal of a "good death" pursued by the hospice movement has also fueled the establishment of death education in Taiwan. Although there have been voices in Taiwan advocating the importance of thanatology

and death education since the 1970s, not until recent years was systematic knowledge concerning death-related issues organized for teaching in schools. The growing field of death education explores the conceptions of death and subjects related to death, dying, loss, bereavement, and grief in a variety of disciplines. It helps students recognize death as part of life, thereby reflecting the value of life. Its ultimate goal is the fulfillment of life and the achievement of a good death.⁴

Despite efforts toward promoting and pursuing a good death, there is no standard answer to the question of what it means to die a good death. Different cultures, religious beliefs, disciplines, and even individuals comprehend or interpret a good death in different ways. The various perceptions of it usually determine different practices toward the good death ideal. In Taiwan, there has been a great deficiency in studying the attributes of a good death, although researchers in the West have focused increasing attention on what constitutes a good death. Except for a few attempts, most studies with an aim to promote a good death in Taiwan have indiscriminately accepted the descriptions of the elements of a good death imported from the West. However, it is questionable whether a Western idealized "good death" can match the ideology of a "good death" rooted in Taiwanese society and whether the end-of-life care provided in hospice units underpinned by the Western "good death" ideal is able to meet the needs of terminally ill patients in Taiwan.

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Correspondence: Ling-In Lilian Chuu, MA, Humanities Division,
Graduate Institute of Medical Sciences, Taipei Medical University,
250 Wu-Hsing Street, Taipei 11031, Taiwan, R.O.C.
Tel: 886-2-2736-1661 ext. 3231; Fax: 886-2-8732-5288;
E-mail: chuu0202@tmu.edu.tw