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*Graceful Exits: How Great Beings Die.* Compiled and edited by Sushila Blackman. New York: Weatherhill, 1997. Pp. 160. ISBN 0-8348-0391-7, US \$12.95.

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There is a certain poignancy to reviewing *Graceful Exits*, a small volume of 108 stories about the deaths of spiritual masters from the Tibetan, Hindu, and Zen traditions. Editor and compiler Sushila Blackman died about six weeks after having submitted the final proofs. The stories were collected in order to provide a model of “how to face leaving this world gracefully and to place death in its proper perspective” (p. 7). The final note in the book states, “Sushila Blackman died peacefully and consciously on the afternoon of Saturday, November 9, 1996. In the spiritual tradition she followed, this day is celebrated as Diwali, the Festival of Lights, and the beginning of the New Year.” Through the power of example, the author has succeeded in her purpose: to make the passage of others through death “more grace-filled, more filled with light, more saturated with God’s sublime love and understanding” (p. 149).

The two goals of the book—to provide role models and place death in its proper perspective—are advanced through a short introduction, followed by the death stories of the masters, which are presented with no further comment. The last section of the book follows Blackman’s integration of the insights into her own life and death.

Blackman’s introduction sets the stage for the stories that follow. The stories are rooted in the belief that we are reborn according to our negative and positive energies (karma), that we are essentially spiritual beings rather than physical ones, and that our highest goal as spiritual beings is to realize our true self, which results in liberation from the cycle of rebirth (unless the liberated being chooses to be reborn out of compassion for others). This final state entails existence devoid of limitation or separation (p. 11). Thus death, a natural and unavoidable part of the human physical condition, does not touch the inner self. In this sense, death is not real (p. 11). Liberation is pursued by finding a master who can guide us in living well. Living well encompasses meditation, which helps us overcome egocentrism, anticipate or experience death while living, and live a life of devotion to spiritual teachers and compassion for all beings. Identification with the true part of our being is possible in this life and when accomplished, removes all fear of death. This is made visible in the lives of the great masters who die as they have lived—with humor, compassion, and strength.

The 108 stories validate this approach by the simple weight of their being. As each story flows into the next, certain themes emerge: the foreknowledge of many masters and their ability to control the time and manner of their death, their concern for their disciples expressed in blessings, consolation, or insistence that the student “get the message,” and supernatural signs or unusual occurrences (failure of the body to decompose, for example) that

validate the master and therefore his/her teaching and our belief that we can identify the sacred in our midst. Interspersed with the stories are sayings by many of the masters that emphasize the points made in the introduction, this one from Milarepa, for example:

You should strive for a readiness to die! Be certain and ready;  
when the time comes, will have no fear and no regret.

In the “Afterword” Blackman discusses a comment by Glenn Mullin, in light of her own experience of the death of her teacher Swami Muktananda: “Nothing is considered to be a more powerful teacher of death and impermanence than the passing of one's own guru.” The theme in this final section, encompassing the death of the author's parents and herself, is very much one of rebirth. In the death of her teacher and parents, she found grace, an internalizing of the teacher's love, and a recognition that death will bring merging with the guru's heart (p. 145). Although she had begun to compile the death stories and had even chosen a title, Blackman was unable to articulate her reason for doing so until she found herself suddenly diagnosed with terminal cancer. Unknowingly, she had been compiling a training manual for her own “graceful exit” (p. 147). The final weeks of her life were filled with spiritual progress, grace and love, and the completion of the volume. It is appropriate that she died at a time of new beginnings, as it is clear that she was looking ahead to the future as the present drew to its close.

As a training manual for those who are familiar with and accept the spiritual paradigms of Hindu and Buddhist thought, and who have some experience with spiritual quest and meditation, *Graceful Exits* will prove to be reassuring; the anthology will likely be used by many on a regular basis for contemplation and meditation. Certainly the example of Blackman herself provides a guide to the use of the volume. Thus, her purpose in writing the book is accomplished.

For those with little or no exposure to Hindu and Buddhist thought, however, the book is problematic. The “Introduction” draws on a wide variety of materials, from Ian Stevenson's work on reincarnation through Raymond Moody's studies of near-death experiences to Sherwin Nuland's recent volume on the process of physical death. None of these works is explored in any depth. This is not a problem, given the general nature of the book and its target audience. Yet I continued to think of ways that the work could be developed as an anthology suitable for use in “Death and Dying” courses, a use that brought me to the book initially. Substantially expanding the introduction with an in-depth discussion of current materials on the subjects presented in that chapter would be one possible course of action.

Further, while Blackman states that she has tried to choose stories that focus more on the actual death experience than the hagiographic retelling of them (p. 23), there are a multitude of problems with accepting many of the stories at face value. Rainbow clouds and the lack of physical disintegration weeks after death are only two examples. Prefacing these stories with some discussion of death rituals and some background on literary critical approaches to sacred narratives would provide the reader with some context for understanding the stories, particularly those rooted in Zen. An in-depth analysis of a select few from each of the traditions discussed would be an added bonus.

My purpose in drawing attention to these points is not to criticize the book for what it is not and was never intended to be, but to suggest ways in which others might want to further develop the work Blackman has begun. While useful on its own terms, a foundation has also been laid in *Graceful Exits* for another book, or two.