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A dedicated doctor and teacher, Prof Dr Sumalee Nimmannit taught by example how to live _ and die _ in peace

Story by KARNJARIYA SUKRUNG z Picture courtesy of PRAEW MAGAZINE

By courtesy of the Outlook Section of The Bangkok Post

The final signs have arrived. The frail and chemo-radiated-dark body became unmovable. The lips became parched. The breathing became rough and heavy.

Aware of these bodily signs of her impending death, Prof Emeritus Sumalee Nimmannit placed her hands on her abdomen in the same fashion she would do while meditating. Her weary eyes closed. The room filled with an air of peace and silence.

No hustle of resuscitation machines, no panicky stomps of medical team struggling for life, nor crying relatives and friends.

Her breathing gradually became softer, until half an hour later, when it stopped completely at 6:30pm on September

13. Her body remained at peace on her deathbed at Siriraj Hospital.

Even at the very end of her life, Sumalee was, and still is a teacher. "It's possible and fulfilling to die in peace and with awareness," is the message she had been teaching her medical students, her co-workers and patients throughout her 20 years as the head of the Department of Medicine and the renal unit.

Her life may have ended after just 66 years, but her legacy and the treasures she left behind will live on in the hearts of the numerous people she worked with, her medical research, her ethical codes for the medical profession, her end of life care or her meditation programmes for medical students.

As a dedicated doctor and teacher, Sumalee showed us that meaningful living in public service, mind training and the acceptance of death are ways towards peaceful dying.

Sumalee's life and death would have been a different story had she not known, and been inspired by Buddhism and insight meditation.

"I'm not interested in death and dying because of my background in medicine. In modern medicine we are taught to care about the living and saving lives," she once said in an interview, adding that, "My interest and work towards end of life care began when I knew insight meditation."

A pragmatist, Sumalee said she would only accept treatment and medicine that had been proved scientifically.

With her young sister, Sumalee attended a seven-night, eight-day meditation workshop with a Vipassana meditation teacher, Siri Krinchai.

"I attended the meditation workshop out of arrogant curiosity and my urge to prove it. I was not a good student on the course, though," she chuckled.

"I've learned so much about my body and mind from meditation, more than all my extensive years of studying medical science," she said, summing-up her first experience.

"Insight meditation is an 'inner science' that you need to prove to yourself."

Using herself as the subject and object of an experiment, Sumalee observed the body's functions and the interconnection between body and mind.

"Your awareness becomes increasingly sharper, so that you can feel, for example, the different temperature of the air as you breathe in and out. You can hear and feel your heart pumping, your blood flowing inside the body," she said.

"Insight meditation taught us to be aware of subtle sensations in the body. In our bodies there is sensation all the time, but our mind is not silent or skilful enough to detect it."

Over the years, she explored other meditation techniques and frequented meditation retreats. A strong-willed person, she implemented the practice into her daily living.

"Being mindful helps one work with a lighter quality of mind. I can cope with my frustrations and anger better.

"With that, I feel I can work more and better, yet I find it less tiring," Sumalee said.

Her extensive practices also gave her what she believed to be a glimpse of death.

"Once I had an experience where all my bodily senses were shut down. There was no sense of seeing, hearing or other sensations. My lungs were not pumping air, my heart was not beating. It felt like dying. However, I was aware of what was happening all along. The feeling was so calm and fulfilling," she recalled.

The moment was swift yet it left a solid understanding. "Death is not that frightening if only we know it and are mindful of what is happening," she said.

This insight into death, she recalled, had calmed her in a car accident. "At that very moment, I thought 'This is it.' I determined to die my best," she said.

As death can catch us by surprise, she added: "Nothing is more dangerous than an untrained mind."

Realising the importance and benefit of mind training in her life, Sumalee started to embrace the emotional and spiritual side of life into her medical work.

She initiated the annual meditation programme for a class of around 200 second-year medical students at Siriraj Hospital, Mahidol University. The programme is now in its 10th year.

The project aims to "deepen doctors' compassion and understanding the truth of body and mind".

"There are lots of temptations in society these days that can drag these good-hearted doctors' down from their noble intentions when they first join the discipline.

"So it's important in our curriculum that these students learn to develop their minds to a very deep level."

Later, she organised more meditation courses for nurses and health-care staff who were working with terminally ill patients.

"It's quite stressful and exhausting for nurses to tend to terminally ill patients, day in and day out," she said. "They need a spiritual boost to continue their noble work, as well as learning the art of taking care of themselves."

For Sumalee, she reflected, helping the dying was a boost to her spirits. "After a round of patient visits, I felt energised, as I have learned ways to listen and share patients' suffering without being smothered by it.

"It's fulfilling to die as one pleases. I saw it in my father's case. My father wished to rest and die at home. When he returned home from hospital, his face looked radiant. He died peacefully, with a calm grin on his face.

"This is what each of us can do for one another, helping people to go in peace. Also, to see someone passing on peacefully helps us reduce our sorrow for the loss."

Sumalee said if doctors and caregivers understand about death and dying, they can do great things to help patients.

In recent years, she initiated the "Healing Our Heart" programme. The two-month workshop touches on various topics that should help patients and relatives deal with their sickness. They include, for example, the connection between body and mind, living with illness, coping with pain and cultivating inner joy.

The sessions, which take place two days a week, comprise a dialogue where patients talk and doctors mostly listen. She also introduced her patients to meditation techniques and advice on coping with their discomfort and pain.

"You cannot push your ideas of peaceful dying onto others when they are not ready. We need to prepare them bit by bit, making them feel comfortable enough to raise the issue," explained Sumalee.

Her end of life care work had prepared her for her own fate. Sumalee found out about her cancer three years ago.

"I have second-stage cancer," she broke the news matter-of-factly in the "end of life care" seminar two years ago. The seminar was held regularly by networks of religious leaders, nurses, caregivers and doctors.

"She had never shown her anxiety, worries or fears over this matter. It was mainly those around her who felt anxious and worried," said her sister.

Being sick did not deprive her of an active lifestyle. It seemed that the ailing Sumalee looked brighter and more cheerful, too.

"I may be gravely ill, but I could not be any happier," she said.

"My days are short now, so I want to share my knowledge, experience and everything I know as much as possible."

She continued to take medical students, nurses and other interested people to the meditation workshops she hosted four times a year.

She frequented seminars and talks on dying, end of life care and coping with death.

In a wheelchair, but still smiling, Sumalee joined the end of life care support workshop she had started. She gave emotional and moral support to others to help them through their pain and health problems, as well as giving tips to take care of their bodies.

During the final stage of her cancer, Sumalee had to go through unavoidable pain brought on by the malignant tumour, as well as the side effects of treatments and allergies to drugs.

In pain, Sumalee made use of the meditation techniques she had learned to cope with it.

"This is not practice any more, but the real thing. All I need to do is to just observe the sensation, without being part of it, liking or disliking it."

Sumalee's calm reaction to pain puzzled her doctors.

"I realised that, in pain, if we twist and groan, our body may require more oxygen and energy, which can aggravate the pain. But if we can remain calm, the pain may remain as it is and over time reduce," she explained.

Sumalee intended to be conscious of the pain.

She accepted a moderate dose of morphine at times in order to bring the burning sensation down a bit, while maintaining her mindful awareness to learn from pain.

"I intend to be aware though the pain and dying," she said.

At the end, Sumalee had what she had prepared and wished for: A supportive family, a medical team who respected her decision against resuscitation and most importantly, a well-trained mind that allowed her to die peacefully.

Part of this article is from the New Consciousness Meeting, where Prof Sumalee Nimmannit gave a talk on 'Peaceful Dying', in November 2006.