

Syllabus 2<sup>nd</sup> International Symposium for Veterinary Hospice Care, Davis, 2009

Presenter: Ella Bittel, Holistic Veterinarian

Topic: Understanding the Stages of Dying – from a Five-Element Perspective

At a time when euthanasia is the prevalent way of dealing with the challenges our animal companions may encounter toward the end of their lives, many of us have not had a chance to familiarize ourselves with the way dying occurs when we allow it to happen in its own good time while the dying individual receives full comfort care.

This can even be true for professionals, given that most veterinarians nor veterinary technicians have never received any education in animal hospice. It took being with her dying dog, for this author to realize that none of her conventional and complementary veterinary training entailed any information on how to support dying animals in their own process.

What we do not know easily creates fear and this is especially true when it comes to a topic as emotionally charged as facing the death of our four-legged family members. When it comes to Life-and Death decisions for our loved ones though, fear does not serve us well as a guide.

In her book “Sacred Passages”, Margaret Coberly, a registered nurse with a special interest in hospice, lays out: “The lack of information and fear that has been generated by our cultural inclination to deny death can be reduced by an open-minded study of the Tibetan Buddhist teachings about death. The theory of the dissolution of the elements provides a workable strategy for charting the course of a dying trajectory. It can be used as a guide and as such can eliminate some of the confusion that arises from not knowing what will happen next.”(1) The outline of the stages of dying below are based on Coberly’s book, as the author of this presentation found the information, independent from religious or spiritual orientation, also helpful for guiding caregivers through assisting their animals in their passing.

This presentation offers the audience to view dying in its natural context of the seasons we go through in life, and explains the dying process as the step-by-step dissolution of the 5 elements, also enhancing the understanding that most of the time dying does not happen in a moment, but is a process.

In Traditional Chinese Medicine, one of the ways in which energetic interconnections between an individual and it’s environment are acknowledged, is based on a Five-element model which was developed by keenly observing the way things work in nature. This model allows us to understand the physical as well as psychological disposition of an individual both in terms of strengths and weaknesses, and can be used to determine how to most effectively re-balance an individual in case of dis-ease. It also illustrates how in the seasons of the year the entire life cycle is reflected, encouraging us to embrace dying as a part of life.

The information presented here is offered to those who might find it helpful for the time of giving end-of-life care to an animal loved one, and wants to encourage further study of the art that is hospice.

While with the required skills and support it often is possible for an animal to pass peacefully in its own good time, it cannot be predicted whether this will be so for a particular individual. This is why on one hand it is important to have in-home euthanasia be available on a on-call base, including during the night and weekend. Secondly, since there can always be a time-delay before veterinary care becomes available, the caregiver needs to be equipped with both a (best injectable) strong and fast

acting painkiller and an anti-anxiety medication to keep on hand should a sudden need occur. We remain grateful for euthanasia as an option for e.g. cases of uncontrollable pain, but want to also point out that against common notion dying does not necessarily have to be a painful process.

*“All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,  
and to die is different from what anyone supposes, and luckier.”*

Walt Whitman

## **Life's Seasons**

The five elements the Chinese Five-element theory is based on are Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water. Each element correlates with multiple characteristics such as certain colors, foods, tastes, even emotions and sounds, but also with a specific season of the year, which in turn can be seen in relationship to the phases we all go through in life.

The WOOD element relates to the season of spring, and during our life represents it's first part, starting with birth all the way through the toddler and teenage years.

The FIRE element relates to the season of summer and the carefree middle of life.

The EARTH element is now considered to relate to late summer, or Indian summer, but originally represented all transitions, the changes occurring as one season turns into the next. Those transitions or times of change are particularly challenging for our health. One example for that is that lots of colds happen when winter turns into spring.

On an emotional level too, times of change mean times of challenge, dying a little death when we leave behind who we were in the past as we transform to who we become. In daily life, examples of such transition times are for a young person growing from adolescence to adulthood, for the parents the time when their child leaves the house to live elsewhere. Loosing a job, a divorce, even just someone hurting us with words all are times of transformation, little deaths.

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, a Swiss born psychiatrist who became one of the pioneers of the human hospice development in the United States, observed that the best way to prepare for ones eventual dying is to meet with consciousness the “little deaths” life continually provides (2).

The METAL element is the one associated with the season of autumn, stretching between heaven and earth as the leaves are falling. It is the time of harvest, of evaluating what has or has not been of lasting value, and it is the time in life when the process of dying takes place. Accordingly, the emotion associated with the element metal is grief, the sound is weeping.

And then there is still another season left, winter, relating to the element WATER. Winter comes before spring, and represents the time of conception. But winter comes also after autumn, after death took place, and is a time of storage, holding the seeds potential.

So one could say that inside the Five-Element model all of life is seen as an ongoing cycle that goes around and around: As birth inevitably leads toward death, death also leads to another birth.

*“...like the seasons you are..., and though in the winter you deny your spring, yet spring, reposing within you, smiles in her drowsiness and is not offended.”*

Khalil Gibran, The Prophet

## The Stages of Dying

When an animal is diagnosed with a terminal illness, there may still be a period of time during which it can continue its daily activities similar to the time before diagnoses. When its condition starts shifting more rapidly, requiring constant care adjustments, is when hospice support can become a fulltime endeavor. Thereafter may follow the time of final shutting down of all body functions, which is called the “active dying” process. This process can vary in length, in animals it commonly takes several hours but it can also be only minutes. During this last time period, there is often not much “doing” required anymore from the caregiver. Then the greatest gift we can give becomes to let the animal know we will be ok when it is no longer with us, and to just being present, maintaining a peaceful and undisturbing environment for the animal, as its focus turns away from us toward preparing itself for its departure. While in anticipation it may seem impossible to attain emotional stability while bidding our Farewell to our loved one, fully engaging in an hospice endeavor allows us to work through some of our emotions, so that during the final moments of our animal’s physical existence we can focus on love, gratitude and well wishes.

While each dying process is highly individual, there are also commonalities that have been observed which can serve as a road map to understand where along the dying process an individual is and what type of support may be called for along that journey.

To explore these stages of the dying process we will turn to another Five Element Model, this time the one coming from the Tibetan tradition. Given that the Chinese and the Tibetan societies were geographically entirely isolated at the time of the creation of their models, it is intriguing to see how similar they are. In the Tibetan system too we have the elements earth, water and fire represented, the other two they consider to be air and space.

Traditionally the Tibetans view the dying process as the reverse of the creation process on the material level. Any manifestation on the material level is understood as beginning its creation process in the subtle, non-physical dimension of the elements. This is easily understood if we think about how everything we see around ourselves in a room for example, the building, the carpet, the furniture and any decoration, was someone’s idea before it got constructed. During the death process then everything substantial goes back to the subtle, the insubstantial, the non-material level. This is described to happen in eight steps, called the stages of dissolution. The first four phases pertain to what we are familiar with as the physical dying process. The last four are said to pertain to the dissolution of states of mind (such as hunger, fear, sorrow) and occur in the first few days after the heart stops.

In this discussion here we will be referring only to the first four stages of dissolution, those concerning the physical aspect of dying. We will look at the characteristics of the different phases regarding external physical signs that can be observed and internal experiences of the dying that have been described in their relevance also to aspects of care-giving.

The process of the body completing all its functions can happen in various degrees of ease velocity and similar to the birthing process might also entail some level of discomfort, usually less however than experienced during birth or also times of major illness in the middle of life. The will to live for all of the remaining time appears to be nonetheless present in most animals as in most people.

## **1<sup>st</sup> Stage: Earth Dissolving**

The earth element is represented in the body's most solid parts: The bones, teeth, nails, but also muscles and skin. As the earth element dissolves, the body becomes in a very literal sense "less solid" through weight loss, which can occur even if the animal still eats heartily. Being skinny as it is typical for a very old or terminally ill animal it can happen that it draws attention from people unfamiliar with hospice care. If for example a neighbor utters concerns about the situation it can be helpful to show them, along with further explanation about the specific condition of the animal in questions, a document signed by the animal's veterinarian stating that it is appropriately cared for.

Such a special-care document is available for free on the [www.spiritsintransition.org](http://www.spiritsintransition.org) resource page.

It is in this phase too though that loss of appetite might set in. This usually does not pose a discomfort to the one dying, yet nonetheless consistently upsets those relatives who do not know what is involved with that process: they commonly confuse the possible loss of interest in food with starving. A dying body simply has no use for fuel for a future that will not happen. Yet this does not equal the ceasing of will of the dying to still experience all that is happening. (3)

When loss of muscle strength becomes evident the caregiver might need to make sure that the animal's head is always well positioned. It's eyes might remain half or fully open. Therefore it is best to keep light levels down. While saline solution can be used to keep the eye moist, that often is not needed and can pose more of a disruption than a comfort the patient. Dying human individuals report that blankets often feel almost unbearably heavy on the body. One of the ways to keep an animal warm if needed other than by raising the room temperature, is instead of covering it directly with a blanket, to drape the blanket over a small table under which the animal can lie.

As the earth phase comes to a conclusion, muscle function is at a minimum and the dying individual remains in a resting position. Unless this phase is drawn out unusually long or it is necessary for ease of breathing, turning the animal as it can be required in those who are mobility impaired during life or in early hospice, is usually no longer needed to maintain comfort at this point.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Stage: Water Dissolving**

The water element is represented in the body through its fluid aspects, such as urine, saliva, blood and lymph. As the element water dissolves, the body fluids dry up. We might see scum on the teeth, and feel inclined to gently moisten the mouth with a wet cotton swab.

While it can already start happening in the earth phase, in the water phase the dying may withdraw it's attention from its immediate environment. The animal may no longer listen to its name or show no more interest in what is going on around it. While to the naked eye it may seem like not much is going on anymore, chances are that the dying is going through rich internal experiences. In human hospice, this is the time when the dying report getting in contact with deceased friends or relatives, a phenomenon well known around the entire planet, independent from race, social and educational back grounds or medications used.

A word about hydration here: While as medical professionals we are trained to always make sure the patient remains well hydrated, during hospice there can come a time when giving fluids is no longer serving comfort but extends the dying process. When the body's ability to process fluids declines, fluids given can end up in undesirable places, and cause edemas or also interfere with ease of breathing. When an animal no longer wants to take fluids on its own, which frequently happens some

time after it may no longer be interested in food, it often is only 24 to 48 hrs away from passing. It's loss of interest in water may also mark the time where it is best to no longer hydrate it in addition.

It is in the water phase that the "last bloom" phenomenon most commonly happens if it at all does. If familiar with the occurrence, it is a beautiful gift to have an animal suddenly regain abilities and interests that it lost previously. A dog no longer able to rise on its own all of a sudden starts walking again, a cat that has not felt hungry in days will all of a sudden want a big meal. Such a last orchestrated effort of the body to use up all its remaining strength within a brief time but at the highest possible functional level can lead people unfamiliar with the phenomenon to believe that the animal is not dying after all, though it will, usually very quickly and easily, after having generously spent its remaining life force all at once.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Stage: Fire Dissolving**

The fire element is expressed in the body as what allows it to maintain its inner heat and metabolism. As this element dissolves, the warmth of the body fades, often starting at the extremities, but also expressed in cold breath coming from the animal's nose.

Digestive power fades, which becomes least evident in those animals who no longer felt hungry and were not forced to take in food they no longer desired; others may show diarrhea, may briefly regurgitate or simply have a last bowel movement. The respiration starts shifting toward shorter inhalations in favor of longer exhalations.

It is important to continue to keep the environment quiet and peaceful, and it is no longer to be expected to have the dying individual respond to its name.

### **4<sup>th</sup> Stage: Air Dissolving**

As air or wind dissolves, since this element is represented in the breath, deepening of the above discussed changes in breathing pattern all the way until the last breath is taken, are the most evident external sign. This phase is often rather brief, and can be accompanied by twitching of limbs and/or stretching moves of the animal's body, typically with the back and neck in a slight backward arch bringing head backward.

Each of the phases tends to be shorter than the previous to it, with the earth phase taking days or hours, and the air phase taking few minutes.

### **Death is Individual**

There are countless "variations to the theme". Phases can be "skipped" or not become evident, and it is possible for an animal (particularly cats with their proverbial "nine lives") to reach a certain stage yet turn around and recover to live for a few more weeks or months, sometimes years. As for example the NHPCO (National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization) statistics on "live discharges" show, this happens in human hospice as well. (4)

While it cannot be recommended to give hospice while hoping that the animal will recover, it certainly is an invaluable positive "side-effect" of giving hospice, that if an animal's life force has been underestimated, no harm has been done.

Eric Clough, VMD, was one of the early pioneers among the veterinary profession, who about thirty years ago quietly began exploring hospice option in their clinics and promoting it to colleagues. (5). Clough stated: "Death is not a failure, not a problem to be solved, but a part of life that can be explored fully." (6)

Many are concerned that dying is painful. This is not usually true unless the animal or person was suffering from a painful ailment already before. Human hospice has a great focus on pain control and can therefore be more effective with it than general practitioners. Luckily, more in depth knowledge about pain control is also increasing in the veterinary field. The IVAPM, the International Veterinary Academy for Pain Management is one venue for its members to ask for input among colleagues when one is looking for improvement of pain control in a specific case.

Richard Timmins, DVM, past president of the American Association of Human-Animal Bond Veterinarians and currently teaching communication skills to students at the School of Veterinary Medicine, UC Davis sees it this way: "Veterinarians have been quick to recommend euthanasia when death is imminent, usually based on the desire to avoid suffering. However, new options for pain management should give pause to this reasoning. The hospice movement in human health care has demonstrated that there are many benefits to both the patient and to the family members if the patient, with appropriate pain management, can spend his or her final days or hours at home, in the company of loving family and friends. Undoubtedly, the same is true for dying pets and the members of their human families. Veterinary Family Practitioners who offer hospice services find that increasing number of clients will gratefully choose this approach. It is a natural evolution of the services veterinarians offer for the benefit of society and animal well-being.(7)

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#### Author's bio: **Ella Bittel**, *Holistic Veterinarian*

Born in Germany, Ella followed her childhood desire to "help animals" by becoming a veterinarian. Now living and working in Arizona and California, Ella has specialized in holistic modalities for over 20 years, among them veterinary acupuncture and chiropractic, cranio-sacral work, homeopathy, TTOUCH and energy medicine techniques adapted from Donna Eden, including work on the animals aura and chakras.

When Ella's dog companion of 17 years, Momo, reached the end of her life, it became clear to Ella that none of her expansive training in traditional nor complementary veterinary care had included any information on how to support an animal through its dying process.

Her experiences with Momo passing in her own good time, and feeling that just like birth, the dying process is of inherent value and an important part of an individual's journey, led Ella to engage in animal hospice and create a weekend seminar "Spirits in Transition", as well as online classes for anyone interested in options in end-of life care for our animal companions. Ella has been a speaker at various professional conferences on the topic of animal hospice care, published articles can be viewed at [www.spiritsintransition.org](http://www.spiritsintransition.org).

The website also gives access to a helpline for anyone who is in an active hospice situation with their animal.

*Ella Bittel graduated from veterinary school in Hanover, Germany in 1994. She is on the board of directors of the IAAHPC (International Association for Animal Hospice and Palliative Care) and on the advisory board for the NHFP (Nikki Hospice Foundation for Pets). Certified with AVCA (American Veterinary Chiropractic Association) 1998, with IVAS (International Veterinary Acupuncture Society) 1999. Member of AVMA (American Veterinary Medical Association), AHVMA (American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association), AAVA (American Academy of Veterinary Acupuncture), VBMA (Veterinary Botanical Medical Association), IVAPM (International Veterinary Academy of Pain Management).*

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