

THE PRACTICE OF GRIEVING

As I took my seat this morning and listened to Holger beat the Han, I remembered the verse that is often written on the wood: *Great is the problem of birth and death. Impermanence surrounds us. Be awake each moment. Don't waste your life.* This verse has helped me to get a taste of the urgency of my situation. It has stayed with me as a reminder to make good use of this day at Jikoji. I want to thank you all for helping me stay with that question.

Rilke said, *Love and Death are the great gifts that are given to us; mostly, they are passed on unopened.* A couple of weeks ago, my wife and I got to open both of those gifts when our dog, Zoe died. She was a great fighter. During her last hour or so, her heart stopped and started beating three times. As she was nearing the end, fighting for breath, the Vet offered to put her to sleep, but I knew she was not in any pain as she was medicated. I knew that this was her death, her final moments, and I felt that I should not interfere with the great transition that she was going through. As The Tibetan Book of the Dead says:

*Driven by the winds, swept by the ocean,
She feels no solid ground.
She is embarking on a great battle.
Moved from state to state,
She is alone and helpless.
Embrace her with your love.*

All we could do was to give all our love and support, nothing else was needed. Finally, she died peacefully in my arms as I whispered to her: *Zoe, it's okay to go. We love you.* At the moment of her death, all apparent separation between us disappeared. There was only suffering and I wished for it to end, with all my being. My entire life became the vow that I have chanted thousands of times: *Beings are numberless, I vow to save them.* I have been reciting that vow almost continuously.

As I was helping her let go of her struggle for one more breath I felt myself open to her and to life in a deeper way than ever before. It felt unknown and yet strangely familiar. There was no duality of any kind, there was no time and no space. Reality had no differentiations of any kind. This reality was far greater than us and yet, strange to say, I was that moment, I was that reality. As Wu Men said, I felt as *vast and boundless as outer space*. My only wish was to end suffering—all suffering, everywhere. To paraphrase Rabbi Hillel, *Everything else was just commentary*.

Her death has been hard and I find myself in the midst of an intense process of grieving and trying to come to grips with what feels like the intolerable reality of life. My grieving has at times felt unbearable, but it has opened me to the deepest level of myself that has been able to take in everything that has been going on with a surprising equanimity and stability.

The first twenty four hours or so were almost impossible. I felt as though I were a drowning man, struggling for each breath, trying to stay alive. And yet something else, much more subtle and mysterious was going on that only later became more clear to me. I began to sense that while the part of me that I call the “ego” was fighting to stay alive and trying to make sense of things that were incomprehensible to it, another part of myself was becoming more and more open and receptive to what was going on without any emotional reaction. That is, part of me was accepting the unacceptable and understanding the incomprehensible.

This part of myself understood that Zoe had passed on to another dimension of life. But I had no idea what this dimension was, or where she was, or if she were anywhere. Her life, which up until the moment of her death was dependent on body and mind to manifest, was now manifesting itself in a way invisible to me. I did not know, but that was okay! More than that, I didn’t feel the urge to figure things out. For the first time in my life, I was in front of the great unknown and I felt no urge to

make it known. There was no fear, just a quiet acceptance. And then I came across this passage:

A student asked his teacher, “What happens after death?”

The teacher replied, “I don’t know.”

The student said, “But you’re a Zen master, you must know.”

The teacher said, “yes, I am a Zen Master, but I am not a dead Zen Master.”

The days passed, and the grieving began to give way to a deeper sense of things. I began to become aware of some of the questions that had first brought me to meditation practice more than thirty years ago: *What am I? What is this life and how am I supposed to live it? How can I live a life that confronts these questions rather than runs away from them.* I found myself returning again and again to my Zafu and my books...and to my self, just as so many of our ancestors have done before me.

At the age of seven, Dogen lost his mother who had urged him to become a monastic and seek the truth of Buddhism. While watching the incense smoke ascending at his mother’s funeral, Dogen had a deep impression of the impermanence of all things. Throughout his life, as he tried to establish a new form of Buddhism in Japan, he would return again and again to the fundamental and intimate relationship between the desire for enlightenment and the awareness of impermanence. Dogen quotes Nagarajuna: *‘The mind that fully sees into the uncertain world of birth and death is called the thought of enlightenment: bodhicitta. ..Indeed, when you understand discontinuity, the notion of self does not come into being. Ideas of name and gain do not arise. Fearing the swift passage of the sunlight, practice the way as though saving your head from fire.*

When I was studying Mahamudra, a part of Tibetan Buddhism which is very similar to Zen, as part of my ongoing practice, I began to contemplate the Four Preliminaries: The preciousness of our human life; our impermanence—we can die at any moment;

the suffering of samsara; the law of karma. I can say that contemplating these four facts of life was very helpful in motivating me to sit, especially on mornings when I was very resistant.

Koben Chino put it this way: *When you realize how rare and precious your life is, and how it's completely your responsibility how you live it; how you manifest it; that's such a big responsibility that naturally such a person sits down for a while. It's not an intended action. It's a natural action.* In the past two weeks I have seen that the only practice that makes any sense is just sitting, shikantaza. At first, I tried following the practice rituals of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, but I soon found that it wasn't very helpful. Words and rituals just dropped away and I was left just sitting on my zafu as I've done nearly every morning of my adult life, with renewed life. And for the first time, I sensed that I was not sitting alone. My practice had become more fully integrated with all of life. Dogen and Yun Men were sitting with me. More astonishing to me, Zoe was there.

I now see that the deepest fundamental interconnectedness that we share with all beings is our impermanence. A few years ago I attended a talk given by Alan Dean Jones, the Episcopal Archbishop of San Francisco. He said that one of his most central practices, has little to do with prayer or ritual. When he finds himself walking down a crowded city street he tells himself that everyone he sees will be dead in a hundred years. When he does this, he sees that all his resentment and anger and unkindness towards others and towards himself disappears. Sometimes, when I am talking with someone I will imagine them on their death bed. When I do this, everything between us, everything in me changes.

I would like to close by reciting the **Five Remembrances** from the *Upajjhatthana Sutra*:

I am of the nature to grow old.

There is no way to escape growing old.

I am of the nature to have ill-health.

There is no way to escape having ill health.

I am of the nature to die.

There is no way to escape death.

All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change.

There is no way to escape being separated from them.

My deeds are my closest companions.

I am the beneficiary of my deeds. My deeds are the ground on which I stand.