

Birth and Death

This afternoon, I'd like to talk about an insight that I had recently. Like most insights I've had, it didn't occur while sitting or chanting or doing kinhin. And it didn't happen while I was reading Dogen or a Sutra or Katagiri Roshi. It happened in the middle of my day. It was an experience not unlike remembering a scene from a dream all of a sudden. Sometimes you wake up in the morning and no matter how hard you try, you can't remember any part of a dream. And then walking down the sidewalk an image of a dream will appear—out of nothingness. These insights always seem to come from nothingness or what you might call, “out of the blue.”

So, the other day while walking my dog I suddenly realized that what we call life and death was really a matter of our attachments, of our avoidances and grasping. I avoided “death” and clung to “life.” Death was terrifying because it meant giving up my attachments. I saw that if I didn't have these attachments, death would be just another day, another transformation in the endless flux of comings and goings. “Death” became just another word to describe the same reality described by the word “life.”

In *Shoji*, or *Birth and Death*, Dogen says that birth and death itself is nirvana. There is no such thing as birth and death to be avoided, and there is nothing such as nirvana to be sought outside of life and death. When we understand the real nature of birth and death, of our life on this planet, we realize there is no such thing as birth and death that we can avoid. Birth and death and nirvana are different words, different perspectives that describe the same situation, but they are not the situation itself. In one case we are bound by the situation and in the other case we are free from the situation. But it's the same situation, the same reality. Reality cannot be divided into subject and object or between life and death. When we realize this we are free from birth and death. Of course I could add that there is *no extinction of old age and death*.

But what does that mean? It means that birth, death, and nirvana are only words and concepts and not real entities or experiences. There is really nothing that we can hold onto. They are partial understandings of one situation that goes beyond all our ordinary understanding. And these concepts, not the reality itself, cause us a lot of suffering. The point is that we must not to cling to or avoid birth and death. We must

experience what is without any emotional reactions to it. Birth and death express parts of the same reality. To understand all of reality we need to understand and experience birth and death as one continuous and endless flux. We need to see the vast periods of time before we were born and after we die as essentially the same reality as the one we are living now. Before we were born there was no one to distinguish our lives from the universe and after we die there will be no one. It is only when we live our deluded lives that there is "someone" to make such a false distinction. When I was a young boy I told my mother that I knew that before I was born I was no different from the Andromeda Galaxy and I would be no different from it after I died. Suzuki Roshi describes this in the chapter, "Nirvana, the Waterfall" in Zen Mind Beginner's mind.

He says: I went to Yosemite National Park, and I saw some huge waterfalls. The highest one there is 1,340 feet high, and from it the water comes down like a curtain thrown from the top of the mountain. It does not seem to come down swiftly, as you might expect; it seems to come down very slowly because of the distance. And the water does not come down as one stream, but is separated into many tiny streams. From a distance it looks like a curtain. And I thought it must be a very difficult experience for each drop of water to come down from the top of such a high mountain. It takes time, you know, along time, for the water finally to reach the bottom of the waterfall. And it seems to me that our human life may be like this. We have many difficult experiences in our life. But at the same time, I thought, the water was not originally separated, but was one whole river. Only when it is separated does it have some difficulty in falling. It is as if the water does not have any feeling when it is one whole river. Only when separated into many drops can it begin to have or to express some feeling. When we see one whole river we do not feel the living activity of the water, but when we dip a part of the water into a dipper, we experience some feeling of the water, and we also feel the value of the person who uses the water. Feeling ourselves and the water in this way, we cannot use it in just a material way. It is a living thing.

Before we were born we had no feeling; we were one with the universe. This is called "mind-only," or "essence of mind," or "big mind." After we are separated by birth from this oneness, as the water falling from the waterfall is separated by the wind and rocks, then we have feeling. You have difficulty because you have feeling. You attach to the feeling you have without knowing just how this kind of feeling is created. When you do not realize that you are one with the river, or one with the universe, you have fear. Whether it is separated into drops or not, water is water. Our life and death are the same thing. When we realize this fact, we have no fear of death anymore, and we have no actual difficulty in our life.

When the water returns to its original oneness with the river, it no longer has any individual feeling to it; it resumes its own nature, and finds composure. How very glad the water must be to come back to the original river! If this is so, what feeling will we have when we die? I think we are like the water in the dipper. We will have composure then, perfect composure. It may be too perfect for us, just now, because we are so much attached to our own feeling, to our individual existence. From us, just now, we have some fear of death, but after we resume our true original nature, there is Nirvana. That is why we say, "To attain Nirvana is to pass away." "To pass away" is not a very adequate expression. Perhaps "to pass on," or "to go on," or "to join" would be better. Will you try to find some better expression for death? When you find it, you will have quite a new interpretation of your life.

Original mind, Buddha Nature, whatever you want to call the fundamental reality of the Universe is expressed in myriad ways. There is the Andromeda Galaxy, Mt. Everest, and Jikoji Zen Center, we are today. We need to express this fundamental reality in our own way. There is only one original face, but your original face does not look like mine. We need to express our original face, we need to find our expression for birth, death, and nirvana.

Getting back to *Shoji*, Dogen says: *This birth and death is the life of buddha. If you try to exclude it you will lose the life of buddha. If you cling to it, trying to remain in it, you will also lose the life of buddha, and what remains will be the mere form of buddha. Only when you don't dislike birth and death or long for them, do you enter buddha's mind.*

However, do not analyze or speak about it. Just set aside your body and mind, forget about them, and throw them into the house of buddha; then all is done by buddha. When you follow this, you are free from birth and death and become a buddha without effort or calculation. Who then continues to think?

So, after we understand that there is no "life" or "death" or "nirvana" we have a way to practice. We can wholeheartedly meet birth and death when they come. When birth comes, we meet birth. When death comes, we meet death. We don't try to turn one thing into another. We do not avoid or desire anything. We don't try to change them. If it's raining out, we don't try to stop the rain, we just enjoy the feeling of the wet drops on our faces.

This is the secret of how to live our lives. I think we can make substitutions here, "birth" is what we like—the joyous, wonderful, vital part of life—and death is what we don't like—what we want to get rid of. We need to face and actualize both equally.

We must not avoid the bad and desire the good. This is how we need to live our lives and it is also how we need to practice. Our spiritual practice is not about getting us more good things in our lives and getting rid of the bad things in our lives. No matter how many times we sit, we are not going to become a Buddha. 'We need to face whatever comes in our lives. When something good is coming, face it and make use of it. When something bad is coming, face it and make use of it. Don't avoid anything. Don't desire anything. Just, whatever comes, embrace it.'

And finally Dogen tells us to leave aside our analyzing and philosophizing. Leave aside everything, even our notions of ourselves and jump into the house of Buddha. We practice for a very long time, but still have the idea that *we* are practicing. At some point we need to take a leap of faith, as it were, and forget about ourselves and throw ourselves into the house of Buddha and trust that he will take care of us. When we follow this, *we are free from birth and death, and become a Buddha, without effort or calculation.*