

Life and Death

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So, good evening everyone. I'm so glad to be here with you again. It's been quite a while, I think. I was thinking as we were sitting, if something Ed Brown likes to say, it's so much quieter when 50 people are being quiet than when I'm being quiet all by myself. I got wonderfully silent there for a long time during the sitting. Well, my teacher once said, talk about what's right in front of you.

And what's right in front of me has been right in front of me since the last week of January. Has been the illness and dying of my dear, dearly beloved Dharma heir, John King, who died last Tuesday. Last week of January, he told me of his diagnosis of inoperable esophageal cancer. And so I have been very aware of impermanence. And yet it's been an amazingly inspiring time to be with John as he went through this journey. I've talked about this before, this actual recognition of impermanence.

And Dogen ZANJI quotes Nagarjuna, who says, to see impermanence is bodhicitta, is the mind of awakening. And my first real experience of impermanence was actually what ended up being the gate for me to enter practice. My best friend and I were sitting around chatting and having a cup of coffee one evening when she had a terrible headache. And she went to see the doctor the next morning, so bad she went to see the doctor the next morning and was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. And within days she went into a coma from which she never

recovered. She was pretty young, about 40, and her body was pretty strong, so it took a while for her to die.

But it was a shocking experience for me because we were the same age. We both had small children, we had most of our life ahead of us, just what I thought. And then suddenly it all changed. In the face of that, I was terrified and I began kind of thrashing around trying to figure out, well, how do you live if you know you're going to die? Actually, during that next year I had a very severe infection which ended up as septic shock and I almost died. So following both of those events, I was kind of frantically looking around to try to understand how to live a life that you know is going to end. So I started wondering.

We have this gift of life, this opportunity to live that's been given to us and we don't know for how long. There's a slogan in the Tibetan tradition that says, death is certain, time of death is uncertain. You know, it sounds very negative, you know, why don't we talk about all this birth and death stuff all the time? You know, there's a, in the Zen tradition we have this sounding board called a Han. It's a big wooden block and you hit it with a mallet and it sounds like that. And it calls us to the meditation hall. And usually on there is written a verse and sometimes the same verse is chanted at night in monasteries.

It goes something like, great is the matter of birth and death, all is impermanent, quickly passing. Wake up, wake up, each one. Don't waste this life. And this awareness that we have been given this wonderful gift and that it doesn't last forever really is an encouragement to live our life the way we want to live it. Not to just fool around and waste time and then it's all over. I, between that first time that I almost died and at that time, this is a little verse in the Mu Man Khan where Master Mu Man says in his commentary at the end, you'd better pay attention to what I'm saying or else when it comes time for the five elements to separate, you'll be scrubbing around like a crab in a pot with all eight arms and legs to get out.

And that's how I was that first time when Pat died and when I got sick and I didn't know anything about impermanence and I never heard of Zen or Buddhism or anything else, I was just going along. But in my course of thrashing around looking for something and for someone who knew how to live a life that you know is going to end, through a number of fortunate occurrences, somebody told me about the Berkeley Zendo and I went there and I met Suzuki Roshi. He looked very much like someone who knew how to live his life if you know it's going to die, if you know you're going to die. He found everyone, without exception, acceptable. He saw Buddha in everyone and he said you should see Buddha in everyone. You can see how in the world he could do that but it looked like he could.

And I decided he knows what I need to know and I'm going to stick with him. I did for two and a half years and then he died. But it really got me started on serious. I grabbed onto this practice of Zazen like you know a drowning person grabbing a life preserver. And it has really turned my life around completely. Some 20 years after I began to sit I had a heart attack and I was not terrified.

But the main thing, the really marvelous thing that happened that made that heart attack such a gift was as I was leaving the hospital I said I'm alive. I could be dead. Wow, the rest of my life is just a gift. None of that. Well my whole life has been a gift you know. It's not a gift you know after you just misjudged a bullet.

It's a gift from the very beginning. So that was a very different response to the experience of coming close to death. And I have to attribute the difference in the response to the 20 years of sitting between the first time and the second time. And I have to say that John's response to his diagnosis was just remarkable. He had been scheduled to lead a class on Dogen Zenji at Zen Center. And the class was to have begun a week after he got the diagnosis.

So in that week he said well I should teach a class on the Dharma of Death since that's what's happening. And so he completely changed his class and he taught a class on death. Sitting up there in the middle of his terminal cancer talking about death and dying. It's kind of remarkable for him to share his life with us in such an intimate way. It was very, very helpful. Just a couple of days after he told me this diagnosis I went to a I went to a fourth reading that I go to every year around the new year.

And in this reading the poet Kay Ryan read this poem. As though the river were a floor we position our table and chairs upon it. Sit, have conversation. As it moves along we notice as calmly as though dining room paintings were being replaced. The changing scenes along the shore. We know, we do know that this is the Niagara River but it's hard to remember what that means.

And when I heard it I reacted to it physically. It was so immediately after I had heard John's news. And the neighbor sitting next to me during the intermission whom I didn't know was Kay's partner of 30 years. He commented that she'd noticed I'd had a physical reaction to Kay's poems. Not just this one but to this one in particular. And I said yes.

The Niagara River was really like a kick in the gut because just the day before yesterday, a very dear friend in my Dharma Air informed me that he had a diagnosis of inoperable cancer. And she said to me, Kay wrote that poem when I was diagnosed with cancer. And she recovered from her cancer. So we know it's the Niagara River we're on but sometimes we forget what that means. And it's not depressing and it's not negative to be reminded of it. To be reminded of it encourages us not to waste it.

It encourages us to really be here, be alive, be awake, be present for our life while we're living it. And not just kind of notice as it's coming to an end, gee I was in a dream the whole time. It really is helpful to remember that this gift is just that it's a gift for us to appreciate, for us

to be grateful for, and for us to live with all of the energy and enthusiasm we can put into being alive. For us to live in a way that we make of our life a gift to everyone around us. And this is what I feel John did. This is what I think was so wonderful about how he lived his life.

His focus once he had this diagnosis was, how can I take care of all the people around me? How can I help them to appreciate their life and to live their life fully and to not be afraid of dying? John was someone, a big part of his practice was working with prisoners. He taught Zazen and yoga at San Bruno, at the county jail, downtown jail, and out at San Clinton. And one of the things that was really important to him was they had just started a practice period, the first practice period, at the Dharmasanga at San Clinton. With a chousseau, I mean, those of you who are not familiar with Zendong, but with a head student, and just all of the sort of whole focus, and it's sort of like a practice period is sort of like a retreat. It's not, you know, it's not 24-7 at San Clinton. I guess maybe it is 24-7 at San Clinton, but they're not in the Dharma hall all the time.

But they do engage in much more meditation and much more teaching, and the head student has the opportunity to begin teaching, and then these things in the Zend tradition end with a ceremony where the head student sits up in front of Zanga and responds to a question from every member of the Zanga. And in addition, there were 16 people from Zend Center who came, who had been head students at practice periods at Zend Center, and we also asked questions. And the head student had an opportunity to respond to each one just immediately without. . . It's not the kind of thing where you consider and think about your response, you respond right from your gut immediately without going through a conceptual process.

And he was very good. But one of the things that John was very concerned about was they had just started this practice period and really wanted to live long enough to see through to the end of the practice

period for the head student and be there for him for his ceremony. And he did. So it was a teaching in itself to watch John turn his attention to how he was going to take care of all the people around him as he was dying. And I want to share with you a poem that I've always liked by Mary Oliver. It's called When Death Comes.

When death comes like the hungry bear in autumn. When death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse to buy me and snaps the purse shut. When death comes like the measlespox. When death comes like an iceberg between the shoulder blades. I want to step through the door full of curiosity. Wondering what is it going to be like that cottage of darkness.

And therefore I look upon everything as a brotherhood and a sisterhood. And I look upon time as no more than an idea. And I consider eternity as another possibility. And I think of each life as a flower, as common as a field daisy and as singular. And each name a comfortable music in the mouth tending as all music does to silence. Each body a lion of courage and something precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say all my life I was a bride married to amazement. I was the bridegroom taking the world into my arms. When it's over, I don't want to wonder if I have made of my life something particular and real. I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened or full of argument. I don't want to end up simply having visited this world. I particularly like the line in that poem.

I want to be full of curiosity. We don't know what death is. There's this Zen story and Muck asks the teacher, well, what happens when you die? She says, I don't know. So what do you mean you don't know? Aren't you a Zen teacher? She says, yeah, but I'm not a dead one. So I really hope that I can be as curious when I know I'm actually approaching my death as I am now. What is it? This is a quotation from Socrates that John brought into the class.

To fear death, gentlemen, is nothing other than to think oneself wise when one is not. For it is to think that one knows what one does not know. Known man knows whether death may not even turn out to be the greatest of blessings for a human being. And yet people fear it as if they knew for certain that it is the greatest of evils. We don't know. We have, of course, in our culture many descriptions of what we think may happen all the way from heaven to hell and anything in between from nothing to everything.

But we don't know. I think the most important thing in the face of that not knowing is to know that we don't know and not to meet it with fear but with curiosity. One of the great virtues in Buddhism is said to be *dhana* or generosity. It's the first of the perfections of *bodhisattva*. It's the first of the four methods of guidance of. .

. Well, actually, I thought it was from Dogen Senji, but Dogen Senji took it from a passage in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, these four methods of guidance which begins with *dhana* or generosity, kind speech, beneficial action, and cooperation or identity action. These four are mentioned in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* as instructions by *Avalokiteshvara* to someone who asks how they should live their life. They occur again in a fascicle of Dogen Senji's on the four methods of guidance of the *bodhisattva*. But the teaching is that a monk doesn't give material things because a monk is homeless and a mendicant. A monk gives fearlessness.

A monk gives the dharma and a monk gives fearlessness. When I first read that about ten years ago, I thought, Oh, I'm a monk and I don't know anything about fearlessness. I'd better start studying this if I was supposed to be giving it. And this is really what I think was so remarkable about John. I mean, I think that was what he was doing the entire almost six months that he had from diagnosis to his death. He was showing us fearlessness and he was trying to give us fearlessness.

So I've been studying this ever since I read that. And as far as I can

determine so far, I don't think fearlessness means not experiencing fear. I think it means more not being cowed by it, not being overcome by fear. Just noticing, yes, there's fear and maybe turning toward it and actually breathing with it and feeling it and acknowledging it. Allowing it to arise and subside. You know, as you know in your vipassana practice, everything arises and passes away.

And so do emotions. So allowing it to arise and subside and not allowing it to chase us around and making us run off and hide or distract ourselves with foolish activity and actually being present with our experience of fear. We want to choose our life in the face of the certainty of our death. There's another question from the Mahabharata, the great Indian classic that John brought into the class. Someone asked the great sage, sir, of all the things in life that you have seen, what is the most amazing? And the sage answers that a person seeing others all around him die, yet thinks, never thinks that he will die. And I have to say that the first week after John told me his diagnosis, I simply couldn't let it in.

The grief was too much and I just couldn't allow myself to even think about it. But the important thing was for me to not deny it or turn away from it, to recognize it. To let the fact of the limited nature of our life be an encouragement to live it well. To live it in a way that benefits everyone. To not get caught up in fear and self-cleaning and forget our connection with everything and everyone. To live our life in a way that makes of it a gift for everyone, not just for me.

Whatever we have found to be beneficial to us, can we offer that to others? Whatever has given us great joy, can we find a way to share that with others? Can we take the gift of this life and spread it around all beings? This, of course, is the bodhisattva vow. Beings are numberless. I vow to awaken with them. Beings are inexhaustible. I vow to end them. Dharma gates are boundless.

I vow to enter them. The Buddha way is unsurpassable. I vow to become

it. This is the bodhisattva vow, the ideal of Mahayana Buddhism. Recognizing our total and complete interconnection and interdependence with everything that is. Vowing to honor that by waking up ourselves for the benefit of all beings.

Sharing this life with all life. And I don't know anyone who exemplifies that vow more than John did. So knowing that life is brief, how shall we live it? This actually was, as I said, the koan that brought me to practice. And it continues to be a very useful koan. A koan is not something that you study and worry about and think about, and then you answer it, and that's that. A koan is something that stays with you as a question that really encourages your practice and your inquiry for your whole life.

Another one that's been a real koan for me is that Suzuki Roshi really talked a lot about practicing with no gaining idea. Just practice for the sake of practice, not for the sake of getting something. And he also said, Zen is about making your best effort on each moment, forever. And those two things, I kept looking, what kind of effort do you make with no gaining idea? I mean, in my experience, every effort I'd ever made was to get something, or be something, or get attention at least, or get an A or something, you know. I'd always had payoff. What kind of effort do you make with no gaining idea? This was another koan for me.

I offer it to you. I think I've had a few glimpses of what that might be like. I think just being alive, making the effort to be fully alive, it's not getting anything we don't have. It's just waking up to what's right here. So I got an answer to my question of how I want to live my life by wanting to emulate Suzuki Roshi, wanting to try to actually be able to see Buddha in everyone the way he did. To actually try to live my life, the benefit of all beings, the way he seemed to.

I'm never going to get there, so I always have, you know, I can keep making my best effort forever. And I'm never going to use up this possibility because it's never going to be perfect, you know. I can always

do better than this. So it keeps giving me energy in my life and direction. So it's the direction I want to go. And I want to encourage you to look at your life and see what's the direction that you want to go.

To live your life the way you want to live it while you're alive. To really choose your life rather than just kind of going along for the ride. So for me the essence of practice is to wake up and see how we're fully connected with everything. And we can be of benefit to everything and everyone around us. There's another poem of Mary Oliver that I'd like to share with you. It's called The Summer Day.

Who made the world? Who made the swan and the black bear? Who made the grasshopper? This grasshopper, I mean. The one who has flung herself out of the grass. The one who's eating sugar out of my hand. Who's moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down. Who's gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes. Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open and floats away. I don't know exactly what a prayer is. I do know how to pay attention. How to fall down into the grass. How to kneel down in the grass. How to be idle and blessed.

How to stroll through the fields. This is what I've been doing all day. Tell me, what else should I have done? Doesn't everything die at last and too soon? Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? No one else can answer that question for you. You need to answer it for yourself. What is it you plan to do with this one wild and precious life, which has been given to you as a free gift? So each of us needs to take a close look and decide what's the most important thing for us to get you in attention there. Really do what we want to do.

Really care about what we care about. Put our care and attention and energy where our real care is. As I said, nobody knows what happens next. But there is a feeling somehow that something happens next. One of the first things I read in *Zendmine Beginners' Mind* and the book first

came out. The book by Suzuki Roshi who founded San Francisco's End Center was a talk called Nirvana of the Waterfall.

And I'm just going to recommend it to you. I'm sure the book's in your library. But the metaphor he uses is seeing Yosemite Falls 1340 feet high. And the water is falling down all that distance. It takes a long time to get from the top to the bottom. And it gets all separated into separate drops instead of being all one river.

So it's one river up above and then it all gets separated. And then when it reaches the bottom, it's one river again. He said those drops must be so glad to be part of the whole river again. I love that metaphor. So he says, before we were born, we had no feeling. We were one with the universe as the drops were all one with the river.

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 the 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. 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 river. 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. For us, just now, we have some fear of death. But after we resume our original, 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. Would you try to find some better expression for death? When you find it, you will have quite a new interpretation of your life. It will be like my experience when I saw the water in the big waterfall. We say everything comes out of emptiness.

One whole river or one whole mind is emptiness. When we reach this understanding, we find the true meaning of our life. Before we reach this understanding, we can see the beauty of human life. When we reach this understanding, we can see the beauty of human life. Before we realize this fact, everything that we see is just delusion. Sometimes we overestimate the beauty, sometimes we underestimate or ignore the beauty because our small mind is not in accord with reality.

To talk about it in this way is quite easy. To have the actual feeling is not so easy. But by your practice of meditation, you can cultivate this feeling. When you can sit with your whole body and mind and with the oneness of your mind and body under the control of the universal mind, you can easily attain this kind of right understanding. Your everyday life will be renewed without being attached to an old, erroneous interpretation of life. When you realize this fact, you will discover how meaningless your old interpretation was and how much useless effort you had been making.

You will find the true meaning of life. Even though you have difficulty falling upright from the top of the waterfall to the bottom of the mountain, you will enjoy your life. Since I first read that shortly after the death of my friend Pat, we have the brain tumor. It's been a kind of resting place for me when I feel myself concerned about death. I don't know what happens next, but I somehow have a very deep feeling that this lifetime is just like one wave on the ocean and that we are at the

same time just the water of the ocean. Every wave is also ocean.

Every drop of water falling down the waterfall is also the river. And every river returns to the ocean. While we are here, as we are, alive as a human being, in this moment, how we live our life, this life, is the most important thing. And each of us must give full