



INSIDE THE DOOR

THE NEWSLETTER OF EISHOJI

ISSUE ONE: DHARMA AND DYING

Welcome to the newsletter of the Northwest Zen Community and Eishoji, a Sōtō Zen training temple in the metropolitan Seattle area in Washington State.

Please see our website:

<http://nwzencommunity.org/index.html>

This is the first of what will be a regular series of Zen meditations by members of Eishoji, reflecting on Zen, the Dharma, the teachings of Dōgen Zenji, and the myriad other matters that arise in the negotiation of life's Way. All meditations are written by practicing members of Eishoji and offered to all who would receive them in hopes of a more peaceful community of sentient beings. It is dedicated to fostering a "Oneness Community" among all beings.

Our first issue is dedicated to two interrelated issues: the Dharma and the issue of death. The historical Buddha taught that there was no solution to the problems of sickness, old age, and dying. The living cannot escape these events because they belong to the very way of the living. Alas, there are always painful reminders of the Buddha's insight. Recent events like the earthquake and tsunami in Japan, the earthquake in Chile, the

terrorist rampage in Norway, and so many other such events show us what is already always true in less dramatic ways: as soon as we are born, we are old enough to die, and that this belongs to the inescapable reality of all living beings.

Yet this realization leaves many of us hopeless and despairing. How do we confront death in such a way that it does not become an argument against life or an indictment of the value of life?

All of the following small essays reflect, either directly or indirectly on the Dharma in the desire to elucidate it and to bring it to bear on living and dying.

We welcome your comments through our website.

What is the Dharma?

Kosho Itagaki

Zen is not a religion in the sense that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are religions. Zen does not possess scriptures like the Bible. This means Zen is not dogmatic. The teaching of Zen focuses on the ultimate issues of how we can live right *now*. For this purpose, Zen teaches that experiences are more important than faith. We could say that Zen persistently inquires into the *now*. In so doing, issues like the afterlife are not at the center of its teaching. It is true that in its use of *upāya* or “skillful means” it has sometimes made use of ideas like heaven or the afterlife, but such teaching are not central to Zen. After all, the Zen tradition only regards the Dharma as the universal truth. A “Buddha” is a person who has attained universal truth. Zen would have existed even if the historical Shakyamuni Buddha had not existed.

The most important teaching of Zen is: “Everything is Buddha-nature.” This is sometimes misunderstood to mean that we all have the potential to achieve buddhahood if we practice ascetic disciplines in order to polish this potential and realize enlightenment. If this were true, however, the prospects for attaining enlightenment are daunting and its realization would not only appear hopeless to a new practitioner, but even to an advanced one. Zen, however, teaches that in order to attain wisdom we only need to recognize our Buddha-natures from the get go. What makes this simple teaching so difficult is that we are always lagging behind the *now*. When we say the word “now,” it is no longer *right now*. When we say, ‘ow,’ the “n” has already passed. As such, it is very hard to be aware of the *now*, even though we are living now.

But what then is the Dharma? The Dharma is the fundamental principle of the Universe. In other words, the Dharma is the Universal Spirit that is variously personified as God almighty, Allah, Jesus Christ, Amida Buddha, and so on. It is the singular truth that should be admitted by anybody, anywhere, and at anytime. It is the Universal Spirit that goes by many names. I think its origin is like a cylinder. When we cut this cylinder

vertically, the surface is square. When we cut it horizontally, the surface is circular. When we cut it obliquely, the surface is oval. Each surface looks different, but the original is the same. I think these differences are the differences among the many religions. I believe that every religion has the seed within it to coexist with all other religions peacefully but without sacrificing its unique essence. It makes no sense for one's back to war against one's chest.

Zen and Death

Kosho Itagaki

We have to be aware that we are just living in a little corner of the Universe. The universe does not discriminate or make distinctions. From the beginning it is utterly without borders. It does not distinguish between light and shade, night and day, wise and silly, right and left, back and forth, you and me, past and future, living and dying, and so on. Nobody calls you in the morning to inform that morning has broken nor does anyone call you in the evening to alert you that night has fallen. Nobody tells you, "Spring has arrived." And nobody tells you, "Now it is time to go." When the time comes, you simply accept it politely.

Nobody can escape dying in any way. Dying is very hard to accept as long as we depend on our relative and dualistic assumptions. However, when we become aware that the world in which we are living now is already perfect, we can achieve an eternal peace of mind. Zen teaches that our world is already perfect. It lacks nothing and does not need for anything. Even dying belongs to its perfection. How do we solve the problem of dying? Accept it solemnly. However, we can live politely in our last moments of life and face our true nature without any arbitrary judgments.

On his deathbed, Zen Master Ryōkan offered the following death poem to his friend and companion Teishin:

Showing now its front side,
Now its back,
Falls the maple leaf.

The Importance of Being with the Dying

Carl Kakuzen Mountain

Dying often evokes fear and makes our own mortality real. Because of this, we avoid the dying at the time when they truly need companions.

We are a species that is hardwired for social interactions and relationships. With the knowledge that we are dying, we become preoccupied with the fear of the unknown. In such a time, it is important to be with others and not be alone.

We find it difficult to interact with a dying person for many reasons, including the reality of facing our own death, not having the time to become involved, and the stress and emotional impact of the situation. Sometimes we have feelings of guilt over our past relationship with them or we fear interacting with them. These feelings lead us to avoid the dying and make it difficult for us to speak with them or even have eye-contact.

Sometimes the situation becomes even more complicated and exacerbates our discomfort when the cause of death is considered socially unacceptable (e.g., AIDS), or if it is a particularly painful death, or if the dying person is particularly young. Opening up communication between the dying person and loved ones is the easiest and best way to bridge the gap between our discomfort and the isolation of the dying.

Here is some advice as to how to facilitate this bridge:

- Let the dying person know you are feeling fearful or uncomfortable, or whatever emotion it is that you have. They are going to figure it out anyway! It will let them know that you are taking steps to get past these feelings and that you want to give them what they most need during this time.
- Ask the dying person what they need or expect from you. Some dying people will want to talk very openly about their illness and their impending death. Others will want to avoid talking about it and choose to focus more on fond memories or the lives of their loved ones. Both are okay, but knowing what it is the dying person wants to talk about during your interactions will go a long way. Some will not want to talk at all, but may want you at their side to hold their hand, read them a book, or just to feel your presence.
- Be present and bear witness to their journey and provide comfort. When appropriate, a smile, or some laughter and lightness, can be immensely helpful. They may want to have you read to them, or look through pictures with them, or just listen.
- Be honest about what you can offer. If they want you to visit daily and you cannot fit it into your schedule or don't feel like you can handle that much emotional strain, let them know. Tell them what they can expect from you. The important thing is to not make a promise that you cannot keep.
- Be honest about what you feel comfortable talking about. Just because the dying person wants to be open and frank about what is happening to them, you may not feel as willing to engage these details. Let them know if this is the case. Or just be there to listen and not make comments. This is about being present for the dying person and this sometimes means just listening.

Dōgen on Living and Dying

Jason Tetsuzen Wirth

Dōgen Zenji (1200-1253), the patriarch of my lineage of Zen and the great harbinger of perpetual peace, announced that the dragon enters the water and the tiger enters the mountain. These are the same words of the Dōgen who warned us to be wary of the “briars and brambles of word-attachment,” and not to “get caught up in skillfully turned words and phrases” and not be “enmeshed in the traps and snares of words and letters” and to avoid the lures of “word counting scholars.” Yet occasions like the heart breaking earthquake and tsunami in Japan, the carnage in Norway, and all of the many other catastrophes that remind us again and again of our mortality, teach us anew what should have already been more obvious: the limitations of language’s capacity to capture the fullness of life. In fact, we need not think of such dramatic events to reflect that death belongs to the way of all life.

Yet Dōgen, whose own parents died when he was very young and who knows fully the deep limitations of language, tells us clearly: *the dragon enters the water and the tiger enters the mountains*. What do these ferocious words say?

They speak to the waking up of one’s entire heart and mind, including the waking up of one’s language. No, language will not capture the world, but it can express the power of a heart and a mind awakening *to* the world. For Dōgen, there was only sitting, *shikantaza*, but this did not mean that Dōgen was advising us to spend our lives sitting around. Everything becomes practice and all practice expresses the deep clarity and generosity of the awakened heart and mind. Even language becomes a practice. *Waking up, the dragon enters the water and the tiger enters the mountain*.

And what is it to be fully awake before the fact of dying? What is it for the dragon to enter the tsunami waters of the ruined towns and cities of the Tohoku region Japan and for the tiger to prowl the hospices, the hospitals, and the countless other places where we find the dying? Everywhere, after all, is good place to die. Dōgen’s answer to this anguished question was uncompromising: We must wake up to living and dying.

We read the following beautiful words from one of the final fascicles from the *Shōbōgenzō* called *Shōji* (Birth and Death):

Should you seek for Buddha outside of living and dying, you are like the one who pointed his cart north and drove off to the country of Etsu in the south, or like someone who faces south, hoping to see the North Star. It would be your piling up more and more causes of life and death while missing the path to liberation. Simply put: living and dying is what nirvana is, for there is nothing to despise in living and dying, nor anything to be wished for in nirvana.

This living and dying is precisely what the treasured life of a Buddha is. If we hate life and want to throw it away, that is just our attempt to throw away the

treasured life of Buddha. And if we go no farther than this and clutch onto life and death, this too is our throwing away the treasured life of Buddha by limiting ourselves to the superficial appearance of Buddha. When there is nothing we hate and nothing we cling to, then, for the first time, we enter the Heart of Buddha. [From the Shasta Abbey translation of *Shōji*]

To enter the heart of the Buddha is to declare a non-aggression pact with life: to cultivate a Buddha heart and a Buddha mind so large and so generous that it does not run away or prevaricate before death. It does not deflect death's blow with clichés and banal little lies. It makes no false promises. It is a heart so big that it meets death.

What is it to meet death? It is not, emphatically, not, simply to embrace and accept your own death. It is to accept death as such. This means to be present to it, to be on the side not only of the living, but also on the side of the dying, to bear witness to dying, to embrace the dying, to affirm the dignity of living also by affirming the dignity of dying. As the great Chinese Zen poem *Sandokai* teaches us, “each and every thing has its merit.” When one does not divide life up into the acceptable and the deplorable, the beautiful and the ugly, one has the bigness of the Buddha's mind, its generosity, its refusal to run away from what the ordinary mind rejects as ugly. It sides with all of life in all of its interdependence. It does not run *from* the dying. It runs *to* the dying.

Dōgen says, however, after he just finished analyzing living and dying, “However, do not analyze or speak about it. Just set aside your body and mind and throw yourself into the house of Buddha.” In the House of the Buddha, we declare solidarity with all of life. In this moment, before this reality, we here also declare again our solidarity with all sentient mortals. That we die is not an argument against life, but in compassion we also realize the pain of dying. The dying are not heavy. They are our sisters and brothers.

God and Zen

Jason Giannetti

יִצְרָנָהּ יְבוֹנְנָהּ יִסְבְּבָנָהּ יִשְׁמַן יֵלֵל זִבְתָּהּ מִדְּבַר בְּאֶרֶץ יִמְצָאָהּ
עֵינוּ כְּאִישׁוֹן

[God] found [the people Israel] in a desert land, and in the waste, a howling wilderness; [God] encircled [them], cared for [them], kept [them] as the pupil of [God's] eye.

—Deuteronomy, 32:10

What does it mean: God kept the people of Israel “as the pupil of His eye”? It would seem, on first look, that this suggests closeness, even intimacy. It also implies watchfulness and protection; that God watched over them carefully. But when we think about this anthropomorphic analogy more carefully, we find that there is something

peculiar about it. The eye sees, but the one thing the eye does not see is its own pupil. So, what could this mean? Did God *not* see the Israelites, or did God protect them as carefully as one does one's most valuable sense organ?

I am indebted to Alan Watts, the great populist of Asian religions, for pointing out that when one approaches the Bible (both New Testament and Hebrew Scriptures) with the hermeneutic utilized in reading Hindu and Buddhist sutras, one finds to one's surprise and delight that the God of the Israelites and Jesus both seem to be expressing some very "Eastern" notions to a "Western" audience, and that the message gets lost in translation. More specifically, Watts suggests, the God of the Israelites presents a number of Zen koans to the sangha. Starting with the perplexing story of the Garden of Eden, we find that the serpent *and not God* tells the truth—thus suggesting a behind-the-scenes conspiracy of the two in order to allow the human drama to unfold. [See Watts, *Beyond Theology*]

We are told about how God commands: "You shall love the Lord your God." But such a *command* to intentionally and consciously elicit a feeling that, in order to be love, must freely, spontaneously, unintentionally, unconsciously even, and certainly unforced, arise in one, seems to put one in an untenable position: If one follows the command because it is a command, then one is not really loving God, but if one loves God independently of the command, then one is not really following the command. [Watts, *Buddhism: The Religion of No-Religion*, 62]

Further, with reference to the New Testament, Watts insightfully comments about the seemingly unique life and death of Jesus. In the "Western" mind-set of Second-Temple Judea, Jesus' claim to be God was heretical and got him killed. "But," says Watts, "if you wake up in India and tell your friends and relations, 'My goodness, I've just discovered that I'm *God*,' they'll laugh and say, 'Oh, congratulations, at last you found out.'" [Watts, "The Drama of It All," in *The Essential Alan Watts*]

I believe that the quote from Deuteronomy is another koan that reveals something crucial about God. The pupil is *so* close to one that it is not noticed. It is that by which the eye sees, but not that which is seen by the eye. Or, as Alan Watts puts it in an essay about the ego, "When your eyes are functioning well you don't see your eyes. If your eyes are imperfect you see spots in front of them. That means there are some lesions in the retina or wherever, and because your eyes aren't working properly, you feel them. . . . [T]he sensation of *I* is like spots in front of your eyes—it means something's wrong with your functioning." [Watts, "Ego," in *The Essential Alan Watts*]

Here Watts is suggesting that the thing we call the "*I*," or the ego, is an illusion created by some sort of being out of joint. When all is working properly, the illusion disappears, or it never appears in the first place. In the quote from Deuteronomy, it would seem that when all was well, the Israelites and God were not aware of any duality between them. It is only when some disturbance appears that with it arises both a sense of humanity's separation from God and God's imperial and imposing presence. In other words, when out of step, when disturbed or diseased, two mutually exclusive egos are created: that of

God and that of the human. This duality brings with it a whole host of other difficulties: duty, responsibility, sin, guilt, punishment, and longing for redemption.

The entire Torah (Pentateuch) could be broken down into three basic sections: creation, revelation, and the path to redemption. The last section takes the form of a journey from slavery into freedom, or, said slightly differently, from attachment to liberation. If we approach this narrative arc with an “Eastern” hermeneutic, we could say that what is asked for here is not slavish obedience to commands, but rather the sudden insight, gained through meditation on God’s divine koans, which results in seeing that God exists, if God exists anywhere, in the pupil of the eye.

Inside the Door: The Eishojū Newsletter is edited by Jason Tetsuzen Wirth and Kelly Zentō Stone. We welcome your comments.

<http://nwzencommunity.org/index.html>