

A Thousand Eyes, a Thousand Hands

Barbara Rhodes, JDPSN



The Buddha taught that human beings' original mistake is perceiving ourselves as separate entities. All of the infinite manifestations of human suffering originate from feeling separate.

The Sanskrit word "Buddha" means "the Awakened One. Just as it is possible to be more and more awake, it is possible to go into a deeper and deeper sleep.

As we awaken, we become more intimate with the sources of joy and pain.

How do we awaken from the illusion of separateness? Reading about waking up will not wake us up. Sincerely wishing to wake up, becoming more and more aware of our "stuck places" will not completely wake us up. What is the ultimate alarm clock? Is there an absolute, earth-shaking, fool-proof method to shake us out of our sleepy habit force?

In Zen practice we ask "what is this?" To ask this is to inquire into each moment of our lives. To ask this is to let go of our ancient assumptions, opinions, and desires, and wake up to what is actually happening in this very moment.

In my work as a Hospice nurse, I have many opportunities to be with people as they are sick and dying. We have a large poster in our office which says, "Dying is no reason to stop living." As ironic as it may seem, dying often awakens people to living. Tremendous healing can occur during the dying process, at death, and after death — both for the dying person and for their family and friends.

A few years ago, my father died very suddenly. Unable to be with him at the time of his death, I felt a need to do some type of ceremony. I went up to the attic of my parents' home, put a picture of my father on an altar, lit the candles and incense, and began to chant the "Thousand Eyes and Hands Sutra."

The message of this sutra is that each of us is capable of great compassion and wisdom. Each one of us has the potential to open an infinite number of eyes, and to sprout an infinite number of hands. We can use all those eyes and hands to see and reach out to our fellow sentient beings throughout the universe, extending our wisdom and compassion.

As I chanted, I felt myself getting confused about why I was chanting, and who I was chanting to. I began wondering where my father was, and what I wanted the chanting to do for him (or, for that matter, for me.) I

noticed that I was doing just what we do so often: I was separating myself from the chanting and from my father, and thinking about a goal or purpose for my actions.

At that point of confusion, I felt inadequate and very humble. I asked myself, "What is this? What does it mean to chant for someone after they die?" While questioning, I continued to chant.

For a few moments I tried to perceive my father's karmic suffering, and direct my energy in some way that would be healthy and bring him increased clarity. Trying that felt contrived, pompous, and useless. Who was I to try to help direct my father's flight into who knows where?

Again I asked, "what is this?" My head full of questions and doubt, I continued to chant. Thoughts of the confusing life my father and I had together flashed across my mind.

Then, finally, I was able to just chant, just try to hear my own sound, the sound of the sutra's words being repeated over and over again. This is the medicine of chanting: filling our usually busy mind with simple syllables, repeating these sounds that have no intellectual messages, and just listening.

Again I thought of my father, and his passing, and gradually, like warm sand heating my body after a plunge in the cool ocean, I allowed myself to remember the love I had for him. The love I felt in those moments was strong and simple. Subject and object fell away, leaving just a daughter's love for her father — just love.

In those moments, I felt awake and intimately connected to my father, dropping my habits of judging and controlling. Simply and genuinely, just loving him.

I have regrets about not having been able to feel that intimacy with my father while he was alive. But regrets can be a powerful fuel to move us towards a deeper commitment to heal, a deeper commitment to continually ask, "what is this?"

Whether we perceive our experiences as joyful or painful doesn't matter. The more we awaken, the less we make distinctions. We gradually stop thinking in terms of opposites (good and bad, health and illness) and simply are with each moment in a clear and open relationship. Our healing, our growth, come from being open and awake. Our discomfort, our suffering, come from defending and protecting our delusional separate selves.

This is the healing process — awakening to the original wholeness of life. Open and present in this moment, the thought of healing disappears; healing is a human idea. There is only being in an intimate relationship with the conditions and situations in our lives.

Barbara Rhodes, JDPSN, is guiding dharma teacher of the Kwan Um School of Zen. □