

Gathering Flowers in a Circle

Tom Campbell

Last summer, my wife and I cared for my mother as she died in our home. I want to share this experience, as it continues to be a very powerful teacher for my Zen practice.

My relationship with my mother was frequently turbulent, especially after my father died. I struggled to sort out what I could give my mother, how much responsibility I should take, and what I could give to her when her neediness and alcoholism took over. Zen Master Seung Sahn, in an interview, told me to just give your parents what they need. That is our primary responsibility to our parents. Strong advice, but difficult for me to fully understand.

My mother had never been a deeply spiritual person, so when we discovered that she had advanced throat cancer, I had no expectations of how she would die or how much strength she had to cope with the great questions of life and death. Fifty years of smoking and drinking had not left an insightful mind, but she retained the warmth and deepest caring that comes from being a mother, even when masked by fear and loneliness.

Over the year and a half that we struggled together with treatments, I realized that she probably would not reach any real acceptance or reconciliation with death. Each treatment only served to provide a small hope to carry her through to the next traumatic event. In the last month, when she left the hospital for the final time, she began to lose verbal communication. Moments of clarity were increasingly small, as we began to increase her doses of morphine.

We began to juggle professional in-home care with care from our family, which seemed to increase her disorientation. She began to struggle and resent all the changes. Finally we decided that she needed full 24-hour care by her family. Since my wife, Stephanie, has been a hospice nurse, we brought my mother into our home.

One day, I was sitting with her on her bed. She had just awakened from a long afternoon nap. Her first words were, "What is real?" I gave her a big, long hug. Then she said, "What is truth?" I said, "I love you." And then she disappeared again. "What was this?" I said to myself. Here I've hardly ever had a spiritual conversation with my mother and now I'm in interview with her. I was stunned and moved.

A few days later, she asked me again, "What is real?" And I said, "I don't know Mom, what is real?" She said, "You and me." Now, I didn't answer, "You already understand," but she did understand and she gave me the most wonderful, heartfelt answer I could ever experience. She immediately cut through all the barriers and questions

in our relationship. There was no separation, no thinking, just us.

In her last days, deep suffering came up. Death is so intensely revealing and intimate. She did not want to wear clothes. We had to do everything for her, wash and clean her. One night she struggled constantly, with incredible strength, trying to get up, writhing and hitting the bed. We could not help her. Higher doses of morphine did not help. We finally realized that she just had to struggle until she could not move anymore. All we could do was to be there and protect her.

Katagiri Roshi, in a dharma talk just before his death, spoke clearly about suffering together when one dies. In death, he said, "You should really understand deep human pain and suffering ... when a person is facing his or her last moment, then you can really share your life and death with him or her."

I am still realizing how much my mother's struggle is my struggle, where this suffering comes from, and how we suffer together. Finally, the lesson of Zen Master Seung Sahn became clear. Just fully being present is our correct situation, function, and relationship. One of the hospice nurses that visited us told me how one of her patients had said, "Once I knew I was going to die, I thought all I had to do was let go. But I realized I had to have patience to die."

So there it is. Continuing until the end. Learning about suffering and pain. Understanding its subtle and vast influences in each moment is what Zen practice helps clarify. The clarification of life and death is our most important lesson. We are not learning about death in order to transcend it, but to see its depth and impermanence.

The energy in our home before she died was positively electric. It was like the energy you get from strong sitting periods. Our family had all gathered. We did not see her last breath—she took it alone. But we were in the room as she passed away and I felt her heart slowly begin to recede into complete peace. After she died, there was absolute emptiness and stillness in the house. The breath and the heart. Energy and stillness. Struggle and release. These are the constant companions in our Zen practice.

After a ceremony at the Seattle Dharma Center, my brother, sister, and I combined my mother's ashes with those of my father and scattered them with flowers off an island in Puget Sound. As we sat and watched, an eddy gathered all the flowers into a circle, precisely where the ashes had disappeared into the deep blue.

Tom Campbell is a dharma teacher and abbot of the Seattle Dharma Center, which is located in the home of Tom and his wife, Stephanie Sarantos. □