

There is nothing special about AIDS

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One day we worry about our socks matching and the next day the world is aflame in an incurable epidemic. In the blink of an eye a disease destroys family, friends and community. AIDS is a disease that refuses any type of a distant relationship. AIDS is immediate, incurable, infectious; right in front of us. We cannot fool ourselves into believing it is someone else's problem when a good friend becomes HIV infected. As the disease spreads, the mental and physical pain begins to touch us deeply.

The conceptual mind realm, the world of words and ideas about AIDS, cannot penetrate deeply enough to help. The thirst of a dry mouth is not quenched by words and ideas. You have to drink so the body understands water. As you cannot quench thirst through the word water, you cannot deeply investigate the meaning of AIDS by relegating it to the realm of ideas.

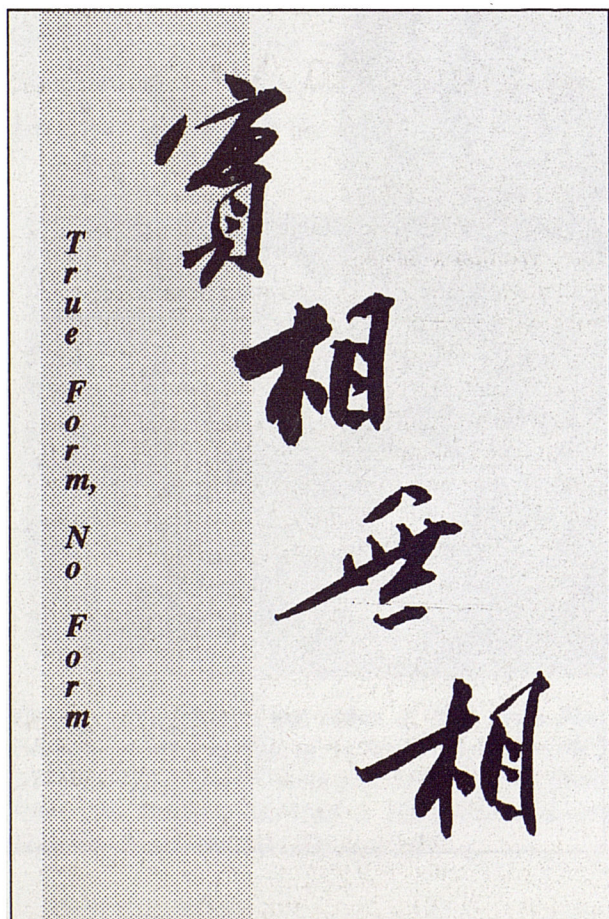
AIDS is indiscriminate, making it no different from any other form of death. Men, women, children, all ages, races and orientations die from AIDS. Humans die from many different causes. The physical and biological world is just like that. There is nothing special about AIDS. There is no distinction between AIDS and any other body sickness that has pain, suffering and eventually leads to death. Someday there may be a cure for AIDS but all humans will still die.

The Buddha also faced disease, death and old age. In these he saw the impermanence and fleetingness of life. His journey was to find the answer to the question, "What is this?" He realized that even princes could not escape death. His ideas about existence began to shatter and he felt a deep compassion for the world. He chose to let go of the ideas, the images, the despair and wake up. How is it possible for us also wake up?

AIDS raises very strong questions: What am I? What is life/death? Where does our fear of pain, suffering and death come from? The five skandhas, the mental and physical forces that come together in an individual form, were perceived by Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva as empty. Form, feelings, perceptions, impulses and consciousness have no base, they can not save us from suffering, disease and death. A person dying of AIDS knows this intimately. We spend our life's energy encouraging the desires of the five skandhas only to realize that they can not save us. Zen teaches that all phenomena are impermanent. The truth appears by itself when opposite ideas such as like and dislike, life and death are cut away. Holding no conditions the mind sees the world as just like this. Form is form and emptiness is emptiness. All that we see, feel, touch, hear is true and complete, needing nothing from us. In fact, we ourselves are already complete at this very moment. What difficulties would this world have if not for people?

*The Great Way is not difficult
If you don't make distinctions.
Only throw away likes and dislikes
And everything will be perfectly clear.*

Zen stresses great courage, great faith and great question. These are simply a willingness, always and everywhere, to let go of our personal opinions and keep a clear mind. As the mind becomes clear, understands this world and its situation, a deeper commitment to help



humanity naturally appears. With the clarity of “don’t know” we can help people with AIDS by spending the time to care and be with all people who are alive.

Body sickness is an opportunity to pursue clarity and is no different from any other kind of Zen practice. This type of practice is extremely valuable since it takes the threat of losing our body and turns it into slowing down a mind full of desires. We fail to realize that the appearance of body sickness is not by accident, is not a coincidence. Karma is already determined by natural process. However, correct direction and try mind can make this karma disappear. If you hold your sickness, are afraid of suffering, have no try mind and only take care of your body, your karma will never change. The suffering will continue.

The fear of body sickness hinders people from finding their true I. Everyone at sometime will lose their body. So it is very important to look at what a human being is.

Oppositional thinking that, life is right and death is wrong, is a hindrance to finding out what a human being is. By overcoming this fearful thinking a realization appears that we are not the sickness, but rather the body has a sickness. Then we can attain the true self that has no sickness or health, no life or death. It becomes clear that illness and AIDS are not the enemy.

We will all die, so letting go of AIDS and body sickness is very important. AIDS simply means you can not do anything. What do you want? Health? A world with no disease, no suffering? Body sickness forces us to look deeply into “What is really ours?” So AIDS, suffering, body sickness and the decay that comes with dying, all point to this true self that has no life, no death. This is every human being’s original job: to find their true self, which means to understand themselves completely and then help save all beings from suffering. ☸

The Ninth International Conference on AIDS

The Ninth International Conference on AIDS convened in Berlin on June 6, 1993. Over sixteen thousand conference participants represented this planet’s best attempt at dealing with AIDS. They shared the most current medical and behavioral research data on curing and preventing this disease. The reports were discouraging and disheartening.

Researchers are far from a cure or vaccine for HIV/AIDS. Whereas last year there was hope of finding a vaccine within a few years, the latest data indicates it may take decades to find a cure. Scientists also reported that a vaccine will not eradicate the disease since twenty-five percent of the high risk population will never receive the inoculation. Many researchers have concluded there will never be a complete cure and that AIDS will be here for a long time.

The data from other parts of the world was startling. AIDS will cost Thailand nine billion dollars, while the toll in Spain is too difficult to estimate since over two hundred thousand people are HIV-infected. At current rates, the world will not be able to afford the health costs for people dying from AIDS.

Women are significantly at risk on every part of the planet. Since the vast majority of countries view women to be less significant than men many of them

will never receive education or prevention services. Many of the world’s nations place a higher premium on the health of men, relegating women to a lower level of medical care and therefore a greater mortality rate. Women’s biology renders them particularly vulnerable to the AIDS virus, making it easier for a man to transmit the AIDS virus to a woman than the reverse. Women are particularly vulnerable since men decide whether to use a condom. Infection rates among U.S. women are increasing and particularly striking in minority communities. Fifty percent of the HIV positive women in the U.S. are African-American. Worldwide, ten million children will become infected with HIV by the end of the decade as a result of mother-to-child transmission.

The AIDS epidemic recognizes neither borders nor political ideologies. It respects no nationality, race or creed. The best that people can do is to practice the “ABC’s” of safer sex. A person can choose to *Abstain* from sex, *Be monogamous* with a partner who doesn’t share needles with others, or use a *Condom*. If humans practice the “ABC’s,” fewer people will die from AIDS. If we don’t wake up, the reports from next year’s conference, in Japan, will be filled with even more alarming data. The choice is ours. ☸