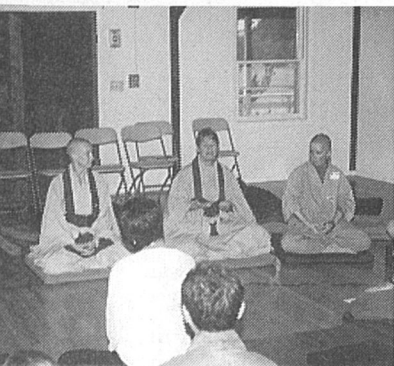


death, dying, and kong-ans

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excerpted from a workshop at the Whole World is a Single Flower Conference



Kwang Myong Sunim JDPS: This workshop is entitled “Death, Dying, and Kong-ans.” Maybe we could start with a kong-an: what is death? [Pause] What a huge kong-an! Perhaps the biggest kong-an faced by humankind. What is death? [Pause] How many people have been with someone who was dying? What kind of experience was it for you? Frightening, sad, positive?

Student: Last year my father died. That was very difficult.

Zen Master Soeng Hyang: I want to ask you, did you chant or use this practice at all after his death?

Student: Yes, I did. I chanted Ji Jang Bosal...

ZMSH: Did you find that helpful?

Student: I think that was the beginning of dealing with my grief; Ji Jang Bosal was all that I could think of to do.

ZMSH: The fact that you said, “That was all I could do, was Ji Jang Bosal,” at least it was something! We can say, “At least it’s something,” but it’s really something when we really do it! If we have that person in our consciousness and do this repetition, there can be an incredible increase in intuition about the whole relationship. This is someone you knew, cared about, and had a lot of questions about. Death of a loved one is not cut and dried. Many questions appear: “Is he peaceful? Is he not peaceful? Was I a good son? Was he a good father? Could we have done more?” But this is really beyond life and death. Chanting Ji Jang Bosal after someone passes away helps open your heart so that the line of demarcation between life and death fades, and what’s left is intuition and intimacy. Then it’s not just about you and your father.

KMSN: This question of how to practice the bodhisattva path with the sick and dying is an important question. If you are holding anything about life and death, then it is very hard to meet the other and help them. If you can be present with wherever they are, in their anger, in their fear, in their courage, in their dying, and go with them, then a just-like-this experience appears and correct function becomes possible. So how do we meet this person who is suffering and in need? Perhaps first by confronting who we think we are, what we think death is, what we think life is, what we think about the whole process. What is death and who is it that dies? It is only in sitting with these kong-ans and bringing one’s realization forth that one can be truly present for another. The specific function of that realization in a given moment may mean holding hands, breathing in and out together, or perhaps facilitating verbal expressions of regret, sadness, or gratitude.

ZMSH: I had a patient only a few weeks ago who had a prison background. There was absolutely nothing I could do. Inside, I just did a mantra the whole time. I sat with him, his wife, the young children who were there. But I couldn’t fix anything. I just did my mantra and tried to breathe slowly. There was no way I could get him to connect with my breath or with his own breath. There was no communication and there hadn’t been, not enough for him to relax and say, “I’m sorry” or “God, I need to talk about this.” We all have to live with suffering constantly, don’t we? Can we get right in the middle and say, “Come on, guys, let’s breathe!” It has nothing to do with whether they are physically dying or not. If each of us tries to be in that place where it’s not death or life but intimacy, then maybe we can help teach that to other people and encourage people to practice. Also, things cannot paralyze us when they aren’t comfortable or not exactly the way we’d like them to be. We can keep our hearts and minds open, and look for the possibilities. And then that awareness, whether it’s out of humor or profound, exquisite communication, is something that can evolve and develop as we practice.

KMSN: An ongoing practice for me is trying to sit with a patient who is vomiting—I still find it hard to keep my center when a patient is vomiting blood or fecal matter! There is initially a reflexive response to protect oneself—to grab a towel and duck out of the way. But if I can stay in the room and at the bedside, the purely physical revulsion and disgust passes and only then can I be of some service to that person; perhaps wiping their forehead and mouth with a slightly damp, cool cloth. In the midst of the entire stink and mess, a deeply profound meeting



transpires! It is one thing having romantic notions about helping the terminally ill, or having blissful ideas about meditation practice. However, the reality is something quite different and can be profoundly confronting if there is an “I” who wants to help or if this “I” wants to attain enlightenment.

Student: What can we do to help someone heal who is terminally ill?

ZMSH: My answer to that comes right from our Zen practice. Say you have cancer: when you have any kind of personal kong-an, if you enter the kong-an even when it’s uncomfortable or you have no resolution to it or feel it might kill you—even if the kong-an is cancer—then you enter it and ask, “What is this?” What is my relationship to this? How are you? What is this all about? That’s the healing. Whether it actually dissipates and leaves your body—and there are documented cases of that—or the person takes it on into another realm, there is the intimacy of entering that and not hiding. If you have the opposition of “I’m against this and I’m against this,” this means only more pain and more suffering. Just melt into it. Melt into “What are you?” That’s what I tell people. But even with a kong-an, it can be very frightening to do that. Some people who have tumors visualize a little Pac-Man eating their cancer tumors. To me, that seems oppositional: that’s more fighting!

Ji Hyang Sunim: Recently, I’ve been getting calls from hospitals and hospices in the area about people who are dying and are interested in having a Buddhist nun visit. These are people who haven’t been practicing so I mostly just talk to them. I worry, though, that there is something more direct or closely related to practice that I could be doing, only I’m not sure how to bring that home for them. Do you have any ideas?

KMSN: Go for some training. What I do is Clinical Pastoral Education, an accredited program for ministers, ordained, and lay people who want to learn how to care for the spiritual needs of others. In addition to using your experience as a dharma practitioner and as a human being, professional training will give you the skills you need to facilitate clear communication with the sick or dying.

ZMSH: I would say that a good 80% of the people that I’ve witnessed dying, that had no practice, died as they lived. There was no increased potential to focus in for that last two weeks or one week or 24 hours or five hours. I’ve seen televisions on, radios on; I’ve seen anger, like “Why didn’t you give me that when I asked for it?” It’s very sad. It’s like when someone drops into the middle of a Yong Maeng Jong Jin with no training: they probably are not going to have a good time. Zen Master Seung Sahn always says, “Hurry up! Hurry up! We have no time!” It’s true, and it’s so much harder to practice when you’re sick and in pain.

KMSN: There is a danger in getting caught up in the forms of religion or particular meditation techniques, or having some idea about Zen practice or Christian practice. It isn’t the practice itself that is significant; it’s how the practice manifests through us as human beings. Attachment to form bogs down natural human process. Death and/or being present with someone who is dying is not a Zen Buddhist process, nor a Tibetan Buddhist process, it’s a sentient being process. But, as human beings, can we recognize and meet the dying in the totality of being, then respond appropriately? Again, in a given moment, that may simply mean bringing a bowl for a patient to vomit in. It may mean ten thousand things. But there is a danger in getting distracted by form when fundamentally, death, dying and kong-ans are just human beings expressing humanness.

ZMSH: You know, form is emptiness, emptiness is form. It’s not time or no-time, not before or after. When you really just take it to your center and sense, “What was that?” or “Who was that?” That intimacy and love are still there. You don’t worry about the time that has gone by, or practicing and not-practicing. It’s intimacy, letting that come into your heart and your consciousness. I love that story in *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*, about the grandmother who was crying for her dead granddaughter and somebody checked her because she was a Zen Master. “You’re a great Zen Master, why are you crying?” And she said, “My tears send her to heaven.” I love that. That’s what that means: love is just flowing, and you send it to them.

Student: Do you believe in life after death?

KMSN: What do you believe?

Student: I don’t know.

KMSN: That’s where it begins, not knowing. Thank you for listening.

