

Grief

When I first read the letter that follows from Jan to his friend, I was very moved by its eloquence, warmth and sincerity. I want to thank Jan. His willingness to share a part of his process after Gisela's death is a wonderful gift for our Sangha.

Jan lost his wife, after she had gone through a very long illness. He no longer sees her. He no longer hears her voice. He has been left with his bereavement, his life without her. What he says about his current process is very open and raw. I get the sense that he has found a way to be comfortable with his discomfort, to be comfortable with his loss, his grief. Comfort with discomfort, great sadness with great love, these are some of the gifts of a strong practice.

Last week I was walking around a state park by myself, surrounded by water, rocks and trees. A spontaneous feeling of grief came rising up, and memories of JW's death brought me to tears [*JW was the late director of the Kwan Um School of Zen. —Eds.*]. I miss him, I honor and love him and chant for him. Jan does this for his wife. We don't know. We can only enter our bereavement in this open state and learn from our daily experience.

My father died in 1988. The day he died I was called from my work and told to go to my parents' home as soon as possible. When I arrived my father's body had already been taken away . . . no time to say good-bye, no last look.

I had an altar and moktak in my parent's attic and went up and

began chanting Ji Jang Bosal. My mind was going all over the place. I had always had doubts about the value of chanting for the dead, and as I chanted, I also was thinking . . . "What good is this? Am I supposed to be directing my father in some way? He was so depressed, so unhappy, how is chanting going to help him, what am I doing? And so on.

But I just kept on chanting, kept on going in and out of "just chanting" and "just checking." Suddenly, I had the experience of feeling like my heart completely went out to my dad, an experience of complete, unconditional love shot from my heart straight to my father, an explosion of love. I've never written this down before, because it was an experience completely beyond words. I write it now because I want to encourage us all to never hold back on using our practice to help others, do it even when you don't completely trust it will "work."

We need to cultivate great faith, great courage, and great question. This faith, courage and question can only come from having an unconditional commitment to practice. An unconditional commitment to practice comes from just showing up, over and over again, even when you have your doubts; those doubts will lead the way, have no doubt about it.

Zen Master Soeng Hyang

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Hi Alise,

Thanks so much for taking the time to gently open this territory up again, for it has faded a bit amid the rapid pace of the last few weeks.

It's not that I want to get on with it. But my job at the moment is so easily prone to thousands of things that demand attention, slicing my life into dozens of pieces even as I have to travel all over Europe and beyond. So it's almost as if I am not consciously choosing but feel like a feather swept on a raging current. I wished to gently verge back into regular work life, but immediately I got tied in to three big proposals on top of my regular duties in research. I have actually consciously stepped back from some things, which is new to me. But it is not enough, and I will have to work with great determination to simplify my life.

My grieving does surface at times, though not as spontaneously as before. Often I have to evoke it, by playing music or touching Gisela's clothes or harkening back to things we did. But every now and then it surprises me, leaping out of nowhere. It is not something I shy away from. I welcome it when it comes, for the flat emotional landscape when I am out of touch with her makes it seem like everything fades to meaninglessness. But I feel that I need to tune in more consciously, not bounce between the flatland and the sadness.

And it seems a foolish dead end to feel any shame about surges of joy and enthusiasm. Things in many ways are shaping up well now, even if some days I feel totally inadequate and half-a-man without her. I would simply like life to seem natural—letting the feelings come and go like flowers emerging in springtime, not being forced out by this therapy or that notion. Let the tears and laughter fall where they may. Because the landscape often has appeared bleak, as if I woke up in a land where there's no moisture in the air and it feels thin, eerie and dreamlike. So I do not want to adopt some attitude or philosophy that will cramp my life, squeezing off that spontaneity in exchange for some illusion of control. Control is a natural aim, but it becomes a sickness when we cling to it. And our loss shows that need for control big time.

Occasionally an insight returns about how healing can start from within by recognizing my links with all around me and to nurture those links with a loving attitude, just living in the grace of listening and appreciating all around me. So it's not some waiting game for a love ship to come in, but just doing it, loving those around you until it's nothing special, it's the river you swim in. That's not controlling the situation. It's simply something I can do, even if it means sitting still and listening hard. It's a loving intention and attention. It's a good way for now, though no doubt there is no end to what we have to learn, and a whole new way could appear tomorrow.

Jan Sendzimir 