

# *I Wasn't Evaporating Anymore*

Laura Nelson

The first time I entered a Zen center was in Austin in 2012. That was the year the Maya calendar predicted the world would end. And it did. My 28-year-old son killed himself that year. He and I had been planning on visiting the center together. Instead, I visited the Austin Zen Center three days after his death, and Ian's ashes are now mixing with the roots of the enormous live oak in front of the center—a live oak, I might add, that has since been ordained as a monk. That live oak is over a hundred years old. That center used to house a Quaker Friends community. Everything changes.

I have written a solo performance piece about losing my son to suicide, and my visit to the Austin Zen Center plays a prominent role:

*"Everything changes. Everything is connected.  
Pay attention."\**

*At the Austin Zen Center, where we went before  
picking up Ian's ashes, there was a scroll with those  
words on it. I'd never been in a Buddhist center  
before, and never heard the Heart Sutra, so when it  
gets to the part that goes "no eyes, no ears, no nose, no  
tongue, no body" I can't breathe. I am evaporating.*

What I don't say in the piece—called "This Space"—is that in that center's practice the Heart Sutra is recited twice and that the second time around my reaction to the words had already, in barely a minute, shifted. I don't know to or from what, really. I just know that by the second go-around I wasn't evaporating anymore.

Back in Seattle, I looked for a Zen center near our home and found the Ocean Light Zen Center. It turns out my husband's much-admired former boss, Michael Schutzler, happened to be a senior dharma teacher there. It also turned out that the practice was Korean based; professionally, I teach French, Italian, and Spanish, as well as English as a second language to adults. Since 2007 Korean has become my "midlife crisis language." Everything is connected.

Michael and Korean were interesting elements, but they are not why I stayed. I stayed for reasons similar to why I've stayed and kept up a regular Alanon practice, and why—and only since Ian's death—I have studied acting: the call to be radically present in every moment. The call to pay attention.

I stayed and regularly practiced at OLZC despite the robes, language, chanting, despite the odd interviewing process. I stayed because of don't-know. When I learned that the Kwan Um School used don't-know as a fundamental, a core—perhaps the core?—practice tool, I was all in. Why? This is easy. Because after Ian's suicide, anyone or any system that attempted to tell me anything besides heartfelt, crystal-clear truths in that moment, or simply variations of "don't know," did not and could not pass my fake-news detector: "Really?" I might reply, hearing something that was clearly just opinion or platitude. "We don't know that." Examples of this exchange came up often around common statements meant to comfort recently bereft and grieving people, and eventually I determined to reply with a don't-know answer:

"He's in a better place now." *Maybe, but we don't know that.*

"Everything happens for a reason." *Maybe, we don't know. Everything that happens happens.*

"Life goes on." *Yes, life goes on, and death goes on too.*

Another unhelpful saying that is meant to be helpful surrounding suicide is "Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem." I'd heard this before Ian died and hadn't thought much about it. Seemed pretty clear and accurate. After his death, though, it did not sit well with me; something seemed terribly off, askew. The statement may or may not be true—don't know—but if it is, it is just as likely that the inverse is also—and demonstrably—true: "Suicide is a temporary solution to a permanent problem." Suicide frequency is on the rise. The problem is permanent. Life is difficult. I haven't been practicing or reading

22]

\* This has been called the Heart Sutra haiku, and was written by Jane Hirshfield as a definition of Zen Buddhism in seven words.

about Zen long enough to grasp exactly what to do with/about/for/on this, though I believe the concept of function comes into play. I want to know more about correct, helpful function.

My very first meditation practice experience happened in a yoga class in Toulouse, France. I was 42 years old and petrified. The instruction was to close our eyes and breathe; the sense of claustrophobia I felt was overwhelming—and hilarious: what could I possibly be afraid of, sitting there? I smiled and tried not to burst out laughing. Our teacher proposed saying *so* on the inhale, *ham* on the exhale, which she explained was Sanskrit [ सो ऽहम् ] and meant “ceci est” in French, or “this is” in English. I later learned that a more common translation of *soham* in English is “I am this.” This is, I am this: are they different or the same? Ha! Regardless, the question of what this *this* is soon arises: What is this? What am I?

During the dharma talk after the meditation that first time at the Austin Zen Center, Kosho Sunim, the monk, asked some questions: “Where are we?” “What time is it?” “Who are we?” He received answers to the first two. The third one, however, was met with silence. A lovely, full silence, that was eventually broken with an answer: “This moment.” I almost cried. Just this. This. What is this? Don’t know. Answers appear and disappear. The sensation of being able to hold, and feel held, within a great ebb and flow of questions and answers rising and subsiding moment to moment took my breath away—and gave it back to me.

“Don’t know” anchored me, grounded me at a time when I was essentially—figuratively, literally, viscerally—decomposed, evaporated, cloudlike. How is it possible for this practice to have anchored a cloudlike me? The answer is the same as the answer to the kong-an–like lyric/question from the *Sound of Music*, “How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?”: “How do you catch a cloud and pin it down?”

The sensation of freefall I was feeling did not subside—my son was still dead, his ashes cooling before we picked them up to take them home—but my relationship to it had changed: What is this sensation of unfathomable pain, freefall, breathlessness, evaporation? I could “not know”; I could allow curiosity to guide me. I could learn to live with the question, the don’t-know. I could try, as

Rainer Maria Rilke once advised a young friend, “. . . to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language.”

I took the ten precepts with the Kwan Um School in September 2018. I consider becoming a member and entering the KUSZ teacher training process similar to other training programs I’ve embarked upon: language teacher training; twelve-step program sponsor-sponsee instruction; peer-to-peer suicide loss survivor workshops; Seattle Police volunteer community chaplaincy coaching. These are a way to help me strengthen and deepen my personal awareness practices, to prepare me to be useful to others—to the sangha, to all the sanghas. This saving all sentient beings business . . . Glad it’s already done and all, but in the meantime . . . SHEEsh! It appears that there’s a lot of work to do. We all need all the help we can get, and to give all the help we can.

I have described myself as a Buddhent—a Student of Buddhism—as opposed to calling myself a Buddhist. It is true, or not far off, to view my relationship to language as an obsession; developing tools to use my obsession to benefit all beings would be swell. The name I was given when taking five precepts was Bon Shim, Original Mind. Ha! What was I before I had words? What will I be after they are gone? Don’t know.

Here are two haikus I’ve written in an attempt to distill my Zen journey thus far:

My son killed himself.  
I evaporate, consumed  
By pain. So—now what?

Maybe zen saved me.  
Maybe not. Don’t know. Clear mind.  
How can I help you?

---

Laura Nelson has been practicing with the Kwan Um School of Zen since November 2012, primarily in Seattle at the Ocean Light Zen Center, where she took the first five precepts. In September 2018, she took the ten precepts at the Empty Gate Zen Center in Berkeley. Laura continues to teach ESL, French and Italian, perform her solo piece “This Space” about the loss of her son to suicide, and feed herself, her husband and their three cats, as needed.