

Suffering, Grief, Choice

Zen Master Wu Kwang

From a dharma talk given at the Chogye International Zen Center of New York, September 2018

[In answer to a question about suffering, grief, and choice:]

I don't know that I would say that suffering is a choice. To use a simple illustration: you are on a long hike and have been walking quite a few miles. You come to a steep incline and you're not sure if you have enough energy and stamina to go up the steep hill or mountain, come down the other side, and continue your journey. The way I see it, that in and of itself is not suffering. It is difficulty and uncertainty. Something arises that is going to test your resolve. Do you have the courage and the will or willingness to encounter it in that moment, the belief in yourself that you can do it?

Then there is difficulty. In that situation, suffering would be what you bring to the situation emotionally and psychologically. How much can you accept the difficulty and work with it, versus how much you start complaining to yourself and fighting against the effort. You are creating another emotion. Suffering in that sense is something we do psychologically and add to a situation. In something as intense as grief, there is the question of the degree to which we can accept our sense of loss, our sense of pain, and even our sense of helplessness. If you have lost someone or something that has been extremely valuable to you, it is not the easiest thing to accept the loss or to recover from the sense of helplessness.

Fundamentally, we are absolutely incapable of recapturing anything. Moment by moment, everything is changing. To use a classic image, you can never step in the same river twice. In reality there is no entity there called "river." We watch a process of water flowing directed by two banks and we say, "That's a river." But there is no permanent thing there that actually is a river. There is no permanent thing in any of our experiences, moment by moment, that stands on its own. That includes what we refer to as ourselves. Every-

thing is a process of interaction and, like a kaleidoscope, it never occurs in the same configuration twice. To be able to accept that everything is transitory and changing moment by moment by moment is to see how things actually are—to see clearly. In Buddhist terminology that clear seeing is sometimes called wisdom. Thus, wisdom is not so much an intellectual process as the experience of seeing clearly.

The earlier questioner said, "But tomorrow morning, it will be the same!" That is already entangling yourself in an idea. Who knows what tomorrow morning is going to be?

There is an old Zen story. A monk approached Zen Master Ji Jang and said, "The sun came up a little late this morning, Zen Master." Ji Jang said, "Just on time."

To the degree we can accept everything just as it is, just on time, just at that moment, then we are not adding anything to it. Most of the time, we are constructing a world of our own making and fabricating stories to support this image-world we generate. It's not a complete illusion. We are not totally psychotic. If we were totally creating something that didn't exist at all, then that would be one thing. But we have enough of something

to hang our hat on, so to speak. We then start making it into something that is more or less than what it is, and we create story lines to support it. A lot of our suffering relates to that process of making and creating and constructing and fabricating and losing touch with just what is.

Q: The recognition that the world of our making and our constructed self are not the truth could feel terrifying. We might feel like we are losing everything, and so then we do everything we can to get away from that feeling.

A: Yes, it could be terrifying. A student once told me, "I'm practicing meditation using the big ques-



Illustration: James Gouijn-Stook

tion, ‘What am I? What is my true self?’ and when I sincerely enter into the questioning process, I get to the point where I’m not sure what I am. Just at that moment, I feel a sense of terror about losing myself.” But if you get comfortable in practicing that point, then there is a transitional moment from the existent world, in which we think we are entities that are totally independent of everything else, as we realize that our idea of ourselves is not ourselves. It requires a certain kind of courage to keep coming back and face that realization, because it may feel that there is nothing to hold on to. It may feel as if you are standing on a seesaw with one foot on one side, and the other foot on the other side. That may sound a little scary, but in Zen practice, we like to be adventurous in order to see, to look, and to flow with our process and the process of the world around us—to realize that ultimately there are not two separate processes.

Q: When Nick quoted the Serenity Prayer he consciously removed the word *God* in “God grant me the serenity and the courage, etc. . . .” Practicing here as a Zen Buddhist, we don’t really use the word *God*, but when I hear that, even as a Zen student, it feels useful in the sense that asking God to grant you something is like having humility, it feels like you are setting something down, opening yourself up to something that is bigger than you. Could you speak a little bit about that?

A: I agree with you about its usefulness. If you are asking “God grant me . . .” that means: I, on my own, do not feel that I have the resources to be able to effect change. Left to my own devices, I do not believe I can effect change or have the courage to enact change, the ability to accept those things I cannot change, and the clarity or wisdom to see the difference. That’s the notion of surrender or supplication of asking for something.

My first teacher liked to play with words. He would sometimes say, “Practice is ego-pendectomy.” However you effect ego-pendectomy, then self-centeredness, ego-centeredness loosen their grip on you. Asking God is a skillful means. If you believe in God, and with sincerity ask for something like that—you are not asking for some material benefit—you are asking for qualities that would be relevant to your life.

Let’s look at our version of that prayer: One thing you see in many Buddhist traditions is the making of prostrations, of bowing. You put your head on the floor; you turn your palms up. The attitude that is embodied in that activity is not fundamentally different from “God grant me . . .” It’s saying “let me put down my egocentricity, the way I’m putting limitations on myself, and become one with something greater than myself.” Most spiritual traditions have some version of that. One uses an image of an external deity. The other uses the notion that, in bowing to my true self, or to my innate wisdom, my innate loving-kindness, my innate compassion, I am

inviting these to please come forward.

I would say the difference is, if you think that God is totally outside yourself, then you are setting up a dualism, a two-ism: God is over there; I’m over here. Whereas in most mystical traditions that still use a term like God, there is a belief that God is within me, and God and I are not ultimately two totally discrete things. Those kinds of practices are helpful.

I remember when members of my family with whom I was very close died, I took to doing prostrations. Bowing helped me to accept my helplessness in that I could not change the fact that they were gone.

Q: What’s the difference between clear mind and not-moving mind?

A: Ultimately, there is no difference. Clear mind has not-moving mind within it, and not-moving mind has the capacity for clarity. But sometimes people get attached to concentration or wanting a deep sense of quietude, which would, to some degree, be in the category of not-moving mind. If you become attached to wanting deep concentration and stillness and its good feeling, that attachment has the potential to interfere with clear seeing.

You could say that meditation practice, Zen practice, is akin to what you see at a railroad crossing: “Stop. Look. Listen.” That’s meditation. Stop: stop going all over the place. Look: see what’s clear. Listen to the inner message that has always been there all along.

Often on a Buddhist altar there will be a statue of the Buddha in the center; to his sides there will be statues of bodhisattvas. *Bodhisattva* means enlightened being. One way to describe an altar like that is that the Buddha represents the not-moving mind, the zero point, the center. But that zero point is not just empty; it’s also full of many positive qualities: wisdom, compassion, clear action, and so on. Thus, the bodhisattvas on the sides of the not-moving Buddha represent the activity of the not-moving mind reaching out to the world. If you only have not-moving mind, and become attached to that, then you can sit like a rock, but if someone is hungry you don’t see him or her. If you become attached to that kind of sitting it becomes a Zen sickness.

Ultimately, our original, natural mind has many qualities: not-moving, steadiness, at-rest, quiescence, quietude, clear-seeing, and compassionate activity. That is why the Bodhisattva of Compassion on the side of the Buddha is sometimes pictured as having a thousand hands. If you look closely at her statue you will see that at the center of each of her hands is an eye. This means that the quality of emptiness and stillness functions by reaching out with helping hands everywhere. You can’t be skillfully helpful unless you can clearly see. That is the way the principle of Zen is represented within Buddhist temples. ♦