

Freedom from Life and Death

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Far apart from any special or esoteric interpretation of the well-known Zen teaching, “Freedom from life and death,” we can *intimately* meet life when a baby is born and intimately meet death when a loved one passes away. This intimately is in the sense of experiencing how our true self manifests, when our hearts and our ears are open, helping us to act with wisdom and compassion. This is possible if we are practicing with consistency and a clear direction; or if we are not a practicing person but we have a compassionate heart and a strong try-mind. If we do so then, when the moment arrives, the correct function of life and death appears by itself, bringing harmony to the death or birth situation, opening the doors to the possibility of digesting and closing the unfinished karma that hinders our lives, bringing joy and peace to our hearts and those who leave this world or come into it. It is in these moments, as we will see in the following three true cases, when we can paraphrase “Freedom from life and death” as “In death, harmony and peace; in birth, harmony and joy.”

First Case: Cinderella

My dear mother, Francisca, was born in 1936 in special circumstances, just one month before the beginning of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). Her father, Philip, was living at that time with his wife, Seraphina, and their two sons in a small village in the mountains of the Andalucía region, in the south of Spain, but he used to spend several months each year working in Valencia, a city at the east of the country. One day, when Philip came back home from Valencia, he carried with him a newborn baby wrapped in blankets to protect her from the winter cold. Philip confessed to his wife that the baby was his daughter, fruit of an infidelity with a young lover in Valencia. In those years, getting pregnant out of wedlock was considered a disgrace to the family of the mother, a dishonor enhanced by the fact that Philip, the father, was a married man. The family of the biological mother concealed the pregnancy, and at birth the baby was delivered to Philip with the order not to see his lover again. When hearing her husband’s confession, Seraphina’s heart was completely broken, but looking at the innocent baby, who years later became my mother, she accepted her into the family and took care of her as her own daughter. But a spark of deep anger toward Philip and a strong jealousy toward his lover was born in Seraphina’s mind. Shortly afterward, Philip and Seraphina moved with their children to the city of Albacete, where they presented Francisca to acquaintances and neighbors as Seraphina’s own

biological daughter, hiding the fact that she was an illegitimate child.

A few months later, Philip was incarcerated for eleven years for defending his democratic ideals against the conservative elements within the country who supported the military revolt against the Republican government of Spain, which led to the beginning of the Civil War. During the difficult years of the war and its aftermath, as Francisca grew up and became a child, her face began to closely resemble that of Philip’s lover, and Seraphina’s rage and jealousy swelled like fire whipped by the wind. Soon she projected those feelings onto Francisca who, without the protection of her father in prison, started to live a life similar to that of Cinderella.

Francisca, being around seven years old, was forced every day by Seraphina to get up early at six in the morning to scrub the entire house on her knees every day, even though the floors were already clean. Later, Seraphina would send her to sell, door to door, the bread she had prepared at home to earn money to support the family in Philip’s absence. That winter was hard and cold, and my mother was sent to sell the bread walking on snow-covered roads with oversized and broken shoes that had been worn out already by her siblings, who had received new shoes. On days when my mother could not sell all the loaves, Seraphina would hit her hard on the head with her fists, or sometimes with one of her shoes.

My mother liked to read a lot, a skill she learned during the eleven months that Seraphina allowed her to go to school, and she used to pick up all the flyers and newspapers she found on the street. Seraphina soon forbade Francisca to read, so she hid every night under her bed with a lit candle to read them, along with the children’s stories and folktales that Seraphina’s clients sometimes gave her.

One day, while Francisca was being beaten, she looked up at Seraphina and said, “You don’t behave like you’re my mother.” Seraphina was surprised and stopped the beating. Nonetheless Seraphina continued to beat and mistreat my mother until she got married, when she was twenty-one years old. All that time, Seraphina never told her that she was not her biological mother. Francisca always treated her mother with respect, love, and obedience.

Soon after Francisca was married with Joseph, my father, Seraphina contracted lung cancer. Francisca took care of her for ten years with tenderness and care, until the day of Seraphina’s death. Shortly before Seraphina

passed away, my mother, Francisca, was holding her mother's hands in her own. Then Seraphina opened her eyes, looked at Francisca and began to cry softly.

"Mom, why are you crying?"

"My daughter . . . because now I realize I love you with all my heart. Please forgive me for all the bad things I've done to you." Francisca and Seraphina embraced each other lovingly and cried together, and then Seraphina passed away in my mother's arms.

This case exemplifies how patience, a compassionate heart, and try-mind can transform the worst karma into a clear and compassionate situation when death is close.

As Zen Master Seung Sahn wrote:

*Very soft is true strength
With harmony comes luck
Goodness brings you virtue
Follow situation then get happiness
Forbearance will make you a great [wo]man*

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Years later, when Philip was about to pass away, he confessed with sadness to Joseph that Seraphina was not the biological mother of Francisca and that he was very sorry for the suffering this caused her. After the death of Philip, Joseph told that to Francisca, who said "Seraphina was indeed my true mother. She raised and took care of me in very difficult circumstances."

Second Case: "I'm Going to Kill Myself"

When my father retired, my mother fell very ill from an aneurysm. After six months of hospital convalescence, she recovered, but she would still need to use a wheelchair for years, and when she eventually managed to walk again using crutches, she could do so only with difficulty and with the help of my father. Those were difficult years for both of them, confronting sickness when, after raising four children and a hard and long life of work, they had hoped to spend their last years at peace and with joy. In addition, a sad family situation related to a certain heavy karma emerged at that time, a situation too hard to be digested by my mother, who soon started to fall into desperation and depression.

Then, one day while I was sitting in meditation at home, I felt I should start chanting the Great Dharani for one hour every day. I chanted for six months, and then my mother, in desperation, tried to commit suicide without success by drinking bleach. Fortunately, she was taken to the hospital in time to save her life and not



suffer any permanent physical effects. The second time she tried to commit suicide, my father arrived at home just in time and stopped her from trying to drink a glassful of bleach again.

During her third attempt, I was present. I arrived at my parents' house shortly after finishing my daily Great Dharani chanting. I found my mother very anxious, accusing my father of not spending enough time with her. Then suddenly, full of despair, as if carried by the devil and with an unusual energy, she got up from her chair without using her crutches and started running toward the balcony to launch herself into the void. I immediately jumped from my own chair and, running behind her, I managed to stop her before she killed herself. I embraced her and she started to cry. Then she told me "When I am alone, I am

going to kill myself."

I don't know from where these words appeared in my mouth: "Mom, that is OK. If you kill yourself, I will kill myself too." My mother looked at me very surprised, seeing that my words were serious ones.

"Why would you do that?" she asked.

"I love you so much that I will follow you wherever you go to take care of you."

My mother then opened her mouth, closed it again and after a few moments of silence said, "Please, my son, don't worry. I promise not to try to kill myself again."

When we entered the house again, my father was in shock, and my mother made the same promise to him. Then I spent some time with my mother and helped her remember how a few years before, Zen Master Seung Sahn advised her to chant Kwan Seum Bosal three thousand times every day to take away the primary cause of the heavy family karma that was hindering her. Then I gave her my own mala. From that day on, my mother kept Kwan Seum Bosal with such an intense devotion that even my father ended up practicing and carrying a mala in his hand wherever he went. Both of them kept practicing until the end of their lives.

This case exemplifies again how, when we walk on the fine line between life and death, our true self can help us to respond with compassion and wisdom if we are practicing with determination. As Zen Master Seung Sahn told me once: "If you practice hard, your energy will help all your family."

Third Case: Let It Go before It Is Too Late

At the end of 2018, my wife, Mercedes, and I were blessed with a long-awaited pregnancy, a baby who would change and give deep meaning to our lives.

During the previous three years, though, I had put much energy, with great determination, to prepare myself to participate in a very interesting project proposed by one person who has always been, for me, an example to follow and a *master of life*. In order to preserve their privacy, I will name that person Sam.

At the beginning of 2019, Sam told me the project would be led by another person. That moment, I understood Sam's decision, and I acknowledged that the new leader of the project was the right one. But slowly, my checking mind grew in a subtle but constant way until, shortly before our baby was born, I woke up every morning thinking "Why not me? I was ready to lead the project. Where is my mistake?" Each night, before closing my eyes, my mind was clouded by the same thoughts. At the same time, an intense anger toward Sam arose in my heart, so strong that it soon became hatred. I began to worry about that, because I perceived that I was not able to control those feelings.

I sat in meditation looking for the inner wisdom of my true self and the answer became clear: I needed to do a special practice to take away that heavy karma before our baby, Julia Alba, was born. So, forty-nine days before our baby was born, I began my special practice.

Early in the morning of September 2 we entered the hospital. My wife's contractions had already begun, and our baby was expected to be born the next day. The problem was, I could not be present: my checking mind and the anger in my heart were stronger than ever. At the same time an urgent feeling came to me: "Wake up! Your daughter is coming." I tried to put it all down by keeping the mantra I was reciting during my special practice, without much success. Then, just before sunset, and after going to have a coffee to try to clarify my mind, I entered the hospital room where my wife was. She was looking through the window, keeping a relaxed and quiet attitude. I sat on a chair, and when I looked at her belly, where our baby was waiting to be born, a clear thought came up from my center: "Don't let your karma cloud your heart when your baby is born!" Suddenly my mind became clear, I went out of the room, and phoned Sam to



Photo: Eduardo del Valle

confess with sincerity my feelings and thoughts. I told him that I didn't want to pass such a great anger and hate to my baby and that I would support the project team and its new leader with all my heart. Sam was deeply touched by my words and, as we talked, we opened our hearts to each other. I started to cry, feeling how all the mass of thoughts and the hate of my heart was being dissolved in the harmony and deep appreciation we had for each other. When I hung up the phone I saw, as if for the first time, the green pine trees and the golden evening light permeating the whole garden in front of the hospital.

When I entered the room again my wife looked at me and said, "What happened? Your face shines with peace!" A few hours later, with my wife's hands in

mine, we received our beloved Julia Alba with love and joy. I was able to be present during the delivery of the baby, my heart was completely open to her, and my mind was light and clear.



Zen Master Seung Sahn taught us "Put it all down." In this sense, if we practice persistently, or maybe we have a strong try-mind, and keep a clear vow to help other beings, then it is possible that, at the most important moments of our lives, our small I vanishes and our true self manifests itself naturally through our actions and speech, permeating with its wisdom and compassion those around us, transforming the worst situations and relationships into clear and harmonious ones.

Our true nature, being able to help us to digest our lingering karma before it is too late, gives us freedom from an unclear life, if we take the responsibility to look inside, listen carefully, and wake up intimately to our present situation. Our true self, being able to make true life shine before the last breath, gives us freedom from death if in our life we have opened our hearts and sincerely take responsibility to help all beings. The last decision is on us. ♦

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