

# The Alchemy of Immortality

Fernando Pardo

This summer I watched the World Is a Single Flower online talks with my children, Barbara (JDPSN) and Daniel. One day they were talking about how the members of the first generation of Zen masters and Ji Do Poep Sas from the Kwan Um School were becoming venerable elders. I share age with this generation. It won't take long for some of us to disappear as dictated by the law of impermanence; it is something natural that we must accept. But somehow this bridge generation between Zen Master Seung Sahn and the new generations will achieve a kind of symbolic immortality. They will always be remembered as the bodhisattvas who faithfully transmitted

vessels containing ergot of rye, similar to the psychedelic known as LSD. It was said that whoever went to Eleusis achieved immortality. In front of the entrance of the temple was an inscription in Greek that said "He who dies before he dies, does not die when he dies." It's an excellent definition for Zen enlightenment, for what is to achieve our true nature, but to die before we die?

The Spanish mystic Saint Teresa of Ávila said "I die because I do not die." And let's remember the Zen poem:

*Life is like a floating cloud which appears.  
Death is like a floating cloud which disappears.  
The floating cloud itself originally does not exist.*

In Zen we speak of the unborn. The *Heart Sutra* reminds us of "no old age and death, and also no extinction of them." This space of immortality is not only Buddhist; it is a world heritage. Finally we will discover that Nam Cheon's cat is the Schrödinger's cat of quantum physics: "Alive? Dead? I won't say it, I won't say it."

A few weeks before I started writing this text, I received bad news: I have been diagnosed with a fairly serious illness whose prognosis is complex. As I have mentioned, I am already at an age when the horizon of disappearance could be not very far. I have had a full life and I am fortunate to have two wonderful children who lovingly care for me. Despite having lost two brothers, my beloved wife with whom I lived for over forty years, and recently my mother, I am grateful for the life I have had.

Some people have asked me if the practice of Zen has helped me to accept such negative news and if it makes sense to continue practicing. Actually the question is poorly formulated, for as a great master said, Zen is useless in the space of relative truth. A Zen practitioner who receives news of this type reacts like any human being, with fear, anger, sadness. But promptly one fully recognizes the teachings on karma and impermanence. Nowadays my mood is serene, and I live moment by moment. Regarding the question of whether I am going to continue practicing, I am going to do it with greater intensity than ever, because I have decided to have a race with death, which if I lose I hope to accept with good sportsmanship. What else can I do? On the contrary, if I achieve my true nature, I will die before I die, so I will not die when I die. ♦

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Photo: Allan Matthews

his teachings. The best tribute you can give them as new practitioners is to continue to maintain the teachings in their original essence over time.

But today I would like to talk about *real* immortality, which is not the immortality that mortals pursue within relative truth! I am talking about immortality in the space of absolute truth. This clear and pure thing—our true nature—does not depend on life or death.

I have recently been reading an interesting book titled *The Immortality Key: The Secret History of the Religion with No Name*. This well-documented book describes the path that goes from the Eleusinian Mysteries (beginning about four thousand years ago) to Christianity, passing through the Dionysian rites. The Eleusinian Mysteries were celebrated for thousands of years. Any Greek who had not committed homicide could attend, and throughout various ages such prominent figures as the philosopher Plato and the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius attended. In these mysteries, an elaborate ritual was performed in which participants went through a process of death and rebirth. Currently there is no doubt that a potion containing psychedelic plants was ingested in these rituals. A hypothesis that historians have found difficult to accept has been confirmed by analysis of small