

Meeting the End of Life Without Impediments: Part 1: Death

We wish to meet the end of life without impediments and that the Great and Holy Ones may come from afar to receive us....May we leave this world...in the twinkling of a second and, in a flash, reach the Sea of the Lotus.

Lotus Ceremony, Lay Liturgy Book, pp. 201-204

I know that we all treasure these words from the Lotus Ceremony. We all wish there to be no obstructions or hindrances to knowing the Buddha, the Unborn, at life's end. How do we prepare for that moment? Our Serene Reflection tradition offers a very simple, always-at-hand way: practice in everyday life.

Great Master Dogen teaches in *Shushogi: What is Truly Meant by Training & Enlightenment*, that when we find the Buddha within birth and death, birth and death as we know them vanish. Rev. Master Jiyu said that when we do so, death becomes just another point in time, and likewise birth. We find the Buddha when we sit still with a bright, open, and trusting heart – the practice of serene reflection meditation.

As I understand it, nirvana is not a far-off state that we hope to enter someday. It is right here in this moment. Dogen described this perspective as bringing the Other Shore here rather than crossing the sea of suffering to reach the distant Shore over there. We “access” this state by meditating, and we can do it anywhere at any time, everywhere all the time. This straightforward simplicity endeared this practice to the common people of Japan, thus earning it the nickname of “peasant zen.”

We tend to make death too complicated, perhaps because of our Western education with its empirical emphasis. We've been taught and trained ourselves to think that we need to know (in an acquisitive sense), and when we feel we don't, we worry. Serene Reflection Meditation teaches that we already have, so sit still and manifest it. This is one meaning of Shakyamuni's holding up a flower and Makakashyo smiling. Only Makakashyo, the disciple skilled in contemplation, knew this “secret.”

Dogen in *Rules for Meditation* teaches that “when the opposites arise, the Buddha mind is lost.” Thankfully, the corollary is that when the opposites are brought back together, symbolized by the gassho, the Buddha mind is regained. In any moment following a moment of “losing” it, we can restore the Buddha Nature’s primacy by returning the mind to meditation. This sitting still is not just the physical posture of seated formal practice. These words describe what we endeavor to carry out in all activity. The expression is used as a metaphor for making our minds as stable as a mountain and clear as an alpine lake, no matter what we are doing. When we are still and bright, we reflect the open and infinite space of Buddha nature.

In preparing for death, we simply bring our mind back to what we need to do in this moment, the present activity that provides a “support” or focus for the mind. That can be sitting, walking, standing, lying down, eating, working, sleeping, etc. We don’t need to take a course, read another book, or learn visualizations, and we don’t need to wait until we feel better or think we have more time. Start right now by meditating, by bringing the mind back to stillness. We can do this in every moment if we’re willing, and perhaps there’s the catch. We have to will, or be willing, to do it every moment. In the left corner of Zen meditation halls stands the embodiment of this kind of willingness – Achalanatha, the Bright Unmoving One. He vows to sit still even in the midst of the greatest hell of suffering, no matter what. He vows to keep bringing the mind back to meditation. And the brightness of that determined effort illuminates all.

By sitting still we also enable ourselves to practice the Precepts more effectively. The Precepts are “wonderful practice,” the complement to seated meditation. They show the way to live and act in daily life so that we minimize harm and create good, and thereby preserve the peace cultivated through formal practice. Remember that actions can be of body, speech, and mind. What we deliberately or intentionally think about has consequences, so take care with attitudes, opinions, and views.

Sitting still also “cleanses karma.” The mirror-like mind can’t help but reflect our past actions in which we have created harm, by both doing

and not doing. We experience this as emotional and mental pain, suffering. The hurt points us to where we need to look, to regret what we have done, and to determine to do better. We vow to be quieter for just a moment longer when old habits arise, and thus practice the Precepts more skillfully.

The ceremonies of Opening the Gate of the Ten Precepts (Jukai) illustrate this process of every-minute meditation. At the week's beginning, we listen to the Precepts and commit to keep them, and then have opportunities to do so for the duration of the retreat. In the dark unknowing of this new way of living (the blood-red womb of the Sange ceremony), we see what we've done in the past and "make full and open confession thereof." Then we learn how to follow where the precepts lead. We literally follow the abbot or abbess as the representative of the Buddha around the monastery, wherever he or she leads, and are given a graph showing how to do this in our own lives. The climax of the week's journey is the Recognition Ceremony, when we see the Buddha face to face and hear the words "Buddha recognizes Buddha." The Lotus Ceremony offertory echoes this encounter:

After our lotuses have bloomed fully we SHALL see the Kind, Honoured One and in person, listen to and hear His voice clearly.

What keeps our lotus from opening and our seeing Buddha? What is the greatest impediment? What is the fundamental source of our obstructions? I believe Rev. Master Jiyu once said that it is fear. It can be useful to look at the contents and motivations of our mind and explore why we resist a contemplative life of meditation and precepts. We can enquire, "Why am I so afraid? What is it that I'm afraid of?" Some possibilities might be: physical pain, emotional hurt, disappointment; separation from those we love; not getting what we want and getting what we don't want; the inadequacy of "I can't do this" and the imagined consequences (failure, and resulting loss of love or status); the pride of adequacy ("I don't need to do this; why should I?") which overlooks the quality of humility; envy ("other people aren't doing this; what if they get something I don't?"), etc. We each have our own collection, but aren't they all rooted in fear?

If we will address such issues, starting right now as we read this article, we'll be that much more prepared and skillful in not being distracted or disturbed when they arise at the time of death. What a wonderful opportunity we all have that is only limited by our willingness!



(to be continued)

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