

## On Living-and-Dying

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A young woman named Kisa Gotami gave birth to a stillborn child. Overcome by grief, she went from door to door in her neighbourhood, the dead child in her arms, asking everyone if they knew of a medicine that could bring her son back to life. Her child was dead, people thought, had she completely lost her mind? Eventually she met a man who said 'I don't have the medicine myself, but I know a physician who does.' She said: 'Please tell me; who is it?' And the man replied: 'Go to Shakyamuni, the Buddha.' Kisa Gotami went to the Buddha and in a flood of tears asked: 'Please give me the medicine that will cure my child.' The Buddha replied: 'I will, but first I need from you a handful of mustard seeds to mix to the healing potion'. Then he added: 'The seeds must come from a house where no one has ever died'.

Carrying her dead baby with her, Kisa Gotami went from house to house, asking for some mustard seeds. The people she met naturally felt sorry for her and gave her what she wanted. But when asked 'Did a son or daughter, a father or mother, die in your family?' they all said yes, someone had died. Soon she found that there was no house in the town where someone had not died. Towards the evening, exhausted and weary, she sat by the side of the road watching the lights of the town flicker and fade. Then night came and darkness fell. In the same way, she reflected, the life of all those now asleep in the town flickered and would one day be extinguished. She thought 'Death happens to everyone'. It was a profound realization that transformed her. She went to the forest to bury her child. Then she returned to the Buddha, and asked him to initiate her to the teachings of the Dharma.

Reflecting on the story, a couple of things strike me right away. Firstly, the Buddha is referred to as 'physician'. He is not a miracle-maker, a prophet of supernatural prowess, a messenger from an otherworldly dimension or one who preaches a special state of mind unknown to mortals. Instead, he is a physician who cures our state of slumber and helps us confront life (or life-and-death, one word in Zen: *shoji*) head on without the filter of delusion. Secondly, he did not resurrect the dead child. I have no idea if anyone can (I doubt it somehow) – including Jesus, who performed his Lazarus trick to an enraptured audience. It may well be that magical powers are attributed at a later date by overzealous followers in order to claim the special status of their tribe.

The Buddha performs a different kind of miracle: he creates a situation where the young woman could come to an awakening. After her breakdown, the devastating grief which did not allow her to think straight, Kisa Gotama effectively reached an understanding: she reflected deeply about the nature of life and death, what in the Zen tradition is known as 'the grave matter'. This realization is not mere logical deduction ('Oh well, we all die sooner or later, so better seize the day old chap'), cynical shrug ('life is a bitch and then you die, so grab as many fat bonuses as you can and don't worry if you do screw up as taxpayers' money will bail you out'). The realization is existential, ie experienced viscerally, by the

totality of one's heart, body and mind. It comes as a shock. It is, in a way a conversion, but in the proper sense of the word – the Greeks called it *metanoia*: a change of heart, a turning point, rather than abandoning one set of beliefs and rituals for another as one rearranges the furniture.

The Buddha's teachings are of no value whatsoever unless they reach the heart and mind of a person and bring about a shift in perspective. They do not proffer a cosmology, prescribe fancy dietary requirements nor are they particularly exotic.

The first, fundamental teaching or 'ennobling truth' is 'to fully know suffering'. 'Suffering' is an approximate and not very accurate translation of the Sanskrit term *dukkha*, which describes a stuck wheel – a metaphor for our difficulty as humans to embrace becoming and to accept impermanence. Mindfulness has become fashionable today in the mental health field though its understanding is limited to being aware of one's thoughts, feelings and emotions in order to relieve stress and anxiety. This is all well and good, but 'mindfulness' is not a technique, a way to 'chill out' after a stressful day at work. For that, watching *The Wire* or *Deadwood* with a glass of Armagnac is a far better option in my humble opinion. To be mindful means to be aware of impermanence, to recognize the delicate work of death everywhere, to awake to the fact that the flower of life blooms right in the arm of the great reaper. We are fragile flowers, even though we may feel great after a brisk walk in the morning sun, even though we may feel invincible when someone praises us or falls in love with us. An illness, a crisis, a setback, a diagnosis: it doesn't take much to make us wobble. 'Nothing to be afraid of?' Maybe. I'd be inclined to say 'Be afraid. Be very afraid. And then use that fear as a great tonic, to turn your life around'.

In that sense, the Buddha's teachings (and Zen teachings as their very essence) are not about 'stress reduction' but 'stress induction': stress in the sense of waking up to the tragic nature of our condition. I use the term 'tragic' not in the disconsolate, hopeless sense but in the way it has been understood by the great tragedians Sophocles and Euripides (before the Socratic rationalist turn): embracing life in its totality, hence embracing death.

Buddhism is not 'the melancholy doctrine' Victorians originally thought it to be. If it were true that 'life is suffering' as some self-proclaiming Buddhists are fond of intoning sagely still today, the world would be full of miserable gits. But the universe, as Adam Fisher says in *Answer your Love Letters*, is filled with joy and sorrow, laughter and tears, sunshine and rain. We should call it *lifedeath* or *deathlife*: one word. How did we get it into our head that life and death are two?

The Zen tradition is full of stories and anecdotes, often in the form of dialogues between teacher and student. A student asks: 'What happens after death?' to which the teacher replies: 'I don't know, I'm not dead yet'

One day Dogo and his student Zengen went to a funeral. Zengen knocked on the coffin and said: 'Alive or dead?' Dogo replied: 'I am not telling you'.

He can't simply say: it is death. There is more than death here. You can't say: it is life. There is more than life here. It's deathlife or lifedeath.

Zengen became restless: 'Why don't you tell me?'. Dogo said: 'No I am not telling you'. On their way home Zengen said: 'Be kind enough to tell me or I'll hit you.' Hitting the teacher is a terrible thing to do. But the student is desperate; he really wants to know. And he really believes the teacher has the answer. Dogo said: 'You may hit me, but I am not telling you'. Zengen hit him. Many years later, after Dogo's death, Zengen went to another teacher named Sekiso and told him the whole story. Then he asked him: 'Please, help me now'. He was still carrying the question with him. Sekiso replied: 'I will not tell you if it is life or death'. Zengen asked: 'Why don't you tell me?' Sekiso: 'No, I will not tell you'. On hearing this Zengen attained sudden realization.

The cuteness of the above story should not deceive us. Most Zen stories (or *koans* as they are known) are designed for us to reflect and respond. The story invites us to cultivate *not-knowing*. Like the young woman in the previous story, Zengen came to a realization, one, I feel, that is linked to not-knowing.

Our so-called knowledge is mostly second hand. We tend to have an explanation for everything under the sun. We like to believe what death is, what life is. One important existential Zen question is 'What is this?' meaning: what is the totality of my experience as it unfolds at this very moment? The aim is not to find an 'answer' but to awake our profound perplexity about ourselves, others and the world. This perplexity, or doubt is present deep down in all of us but we tend to cover it up because it brings up anxiety and fear. So we turn to religion because it offers us a consolation in the form of ready-made answer. God created the world in six days and on the last he had a glass of Armagnac. Or we turn to the scientific explanation: the Big Bang, a sort of cosmic premature ejaculation if you ask me, when a cosmic *coitus interruptus* would have produced a better world. We choose, in short, the fables and mythologies that best suit our style and temperament, whether we profess theism or atheism, whether we choose tea or coffee, science or religion. The third way is to cultivate not-knowing when it comes to the so-called 'big questions'. Paradoxically, it takes a lot of searching, practicing and studying in order to be able to say confidently 'I don't know'. It takes a lot of courage to admit that when it comes to life and death, we know next to nothing. A common phrase used in relation to the dead person at a Zen funeral ceremony is 'Where are they now?' This is pure agnosticism, a powerful word, *a-gnosis*: not-knowing, not buying into the Gnostic or metaphysical trap, however appealing its wares, its consolations and comforts. If I ask of a dead person 'Where is he now?', the spiritual assumption is completely absent ('he/she is in heaven singing halleluiah, or will be reincarnated and so forth) but so is the materialist assumption ('he/she is pushing the daisies thus being ecologically sound by providing compost). What we have instead is a poetic response: our fragile existence is like that of beautiful cherry blossoms (much loved in Japan, where Zen flourished). When the wind rises, some of them follow away. The wind in life is death. *And*: the beauty and magnificence of life (in spite of the suffering it entails) is increased by the certainty of our finitude.

There is another important aspect to this, one that I will mention only in passing. The horror of our inherent softness and mortality, the denial of the very real presence of death has

disastrous consequences on a social and political level. Martha Nussbaum has written eloquently about this topic in an lively and critical essay on democracy in America and the ambivalent legacy of Walt Whitman. 'Death is not just the horror of death – she says – it is also the opportunity for social progress. We do not defeat death, but in assuming a more honest relationship to it we enable ourselves to live better with one another'

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