

Living-Dying
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Good evening, bodhisattvas! Thank you very much for that lovely birthday serenade!

We are continuing to talk about the reconciliation of dualities, talking tonight about living and dying. It seems perfect to be talking about living and dying as we enter the autumn, when the simultaneity of living and dying is all around us so clearly : the cottonwoods and the aspens turning away from summer with a final blaze, and, at the same time, the chamisa just coming into bloom. This is a time that a lot of cultures have seen that the veil between the worlds thin; that the distances between here and there, and us and them, grow thinner, more translucent, and more pierceable. It's more possible to move back and forth between them.

This question of living and dying, such a huge question for us, has been called, in Zen, the Great Matter. This is the Great Matter, this question of why we live and why we die. There is the largeness of it, for sure, and at the same time it's also the most intimate of questions, why we live and why we die. What is closer to the bone than that? What is more inherently a part of our wondering, all the time, than that question? But in the ancestral stream, there is the absence of the split that living and dying implies.

As soon as you've got that 'and' between them, you've got two things : living and dying. In the original languages of Chan and Zen, there is no 'and' there. There's only 'livingdying,' or 'lifedeath', or 'birthdeath'. The great contemporary Zen philosopher, Abe Masao, said, "Probably what we should call it, rather than 'living and dying,' is 'living-dying existence'." The continuity is existence, the continuity is the fact of something happening, and it's a continuum of experience, where at one time living is more in the foreground, and at another time death is more in the foreground. Probably, for most of us, living is more in the foreground, but that doesn't mean that it fills the whole stage. We know the presence of things rising and falling all the time, and, again, here in the autumn, there's birth-death, birth-death, birth-death, birth-death endlessly.

The traditional response to this question of the Great Matter is that its resolution is the motivation for us to practice; to come to some peace with this great question is a giant engine of practice for many people. At the same time, the basic attitude towards it is that there isn't a great difference between the state of living and the state of dying — that if we've been walking through

our lives, death is just taking another step, like every other step we've taken, except this time the ground doesn't come up to meet our feet, and we notice after a couple of steps that we're walking on the sky. And we just keep walking on the sky, as we have on the earth. While many traditions, and certainly other Buddhist traditions, have elaborate practices of preparing for death, and what to do at the time of dying and afterwards, the Chan and Zen attitude is pretty much that how you live is how you'll die. What your life has been like will tell you a lot about what your death will be like, because there isn't such a big difference — it is just another step.

One of the old Chinese teachers, Furong Daokai, said to his monks (and I chose this not because it's extraordinary, but because it's typical of the way life and death were seen) "I'm not asking about the process of dying. I want to know about the Great Matter of death itself. Everyone, at that moment (the moment of your death), the Buddha can't help you. The Dharma can't help you. The ancestors can't help you. All the teachers on Earth can't help you. I can't help you, and the King of Death can't help you. You must settle this matter now." That's the key, the crux of what he's saying : you must settle this matter now. "If you settle it now, the Buddha can't take it from you, the Dharma can't take it from you, the ancestors can't take it from you, all the teachers in the world can't take it and even the King of Death can't take it from you. So, speak out now, what is the teaching of this very moment? Do you understand? Next year, new shoots will grow. The fretful spring wind never stops blowing."

To his list of things that can't help you, we might add : your stuff can't help you, your money can't help you, your education can't help you, all your professional achievements can't help you. None of those things have anything to do with that moment. They are not of that moment, except in the sense that they have been a part of what has brought you to that moment, and part of what you bring to it. If there's a startling quality to that — everything that you're working so hard on, right now, none of it really applies — there's also a tremendous optimism, because he and others were saying that there's something you can do now. In other words, you can settle the Great Matter in this moment, and once you do that, it will be like just another step when you come to your death. You can come to reconcile this living-dying existence, and find peace there; the way you do that is attempting to respond to his question, *What is the lesson of this very moment?*

In another context, when Great Ancestor Ma was asked, "What is the meaning of Chan?" He said, "What is the meaning of this moment?" That's all you need to know. That's all! [laughing]

That's what will matter in that other moment — what we understand of this moment. If you're alive right now, you'll be alive when you die. And we do it, not because if we do then things will go easier in our death, but because we want to put ourselves into that stream of living-dying right now to carry us right through every threshold, every threshold of our lives and, finally, through that threshold into death.

Furong Daokai asks, "What is the teaching of this moment?" He answers himself, "Next year new shoots will grow; the fretful spring wind never stops blowing." What's that? That's life going on : new shoots appearing. It's also death going on : the fretful wind. It's life and death going on right now, all the time, without ceasing: life-death, life-death, life-death, life-death. There is this feeling of not only being aware of death in our lives now, which of course we are; I'm not going to go into how every moment is rising and falling because you know all of that stuff, and it's not so interesting. That's certainly true, but Keizan, one of the great Japanese writers, talked about what's underneath the robe. We've spoken about what's underneath the robe, what's between your robe and your heart, is intimacy. Keizan said there's something connected to that intimacy : "When you forget the self and understand the true self, you will be alive in the midst of death, and in the dark your eyes will be bright. This is the intimate reality beneath the robe."

When we turn our attention toward this in this way, we're not trying to make this another self-improvement project which is one of the dangers of putting a lot of emphasis on special practices about death. *Like, we have to get our death right?* If, in the time of our dying, we're worrying about whether we're doing a good job or not — I mean, at what moment in your life should you not more relax into what's happening, and be present for it, instead of worrying about *Am I getting this right?* On the very threshold. When the Japanese poet Sogawa Shumei was dying, his loved ones were very worried about him, so they were trying to make his death a self-improvement project, trying to get him to recite the Nembutsu, *Namu Amida Butsu*, which is a devotional practice; if you recite that enough you'll be reborn in the Pure Land. They said, "Please, we really urge you: *Namu amida butsu, namu amida butsu.*" He just turned to them and said, "Thanks. Thanks." That was his Nembutsu. Thanks, thanks. Thank you for life. Thank you for death. No problem.

There is this sense, from the very beginning, of the naturalness of it. In the *Daodejing*, the first Daoist text, it says, "She holds nothing back from life. Therefore she is ready for death, as a person is ready for sleep after a good day's work." That's the basic attitude, one of simplicity and

naturalness, and a sense of the thing that persists. What is the thing that is the through-line between our experience now and our experience then, and how do we work on making that through-line strong, real, and accessible?

There's a little bit of theory I wanted to put behind it, because it's beautiful theory, and it might be helpful. It has to do with the *trikaya*, the three bodies of the buddha and of everything else, which we've talked about in a number of different contexts. I wanted to talk about it here in terms of living and dying, particularly in relationship to time. So the idea is that everything has three bodies simultaneously. One body, the *nirmanakaya*, is the physical body, the body of form; the realm of cause and effect, and the laws of physics, and everything that we can perceive, from the smallest to the largest : the material world. The *dharmakaya* is the vast world of emptiness, *shunyata*, the radiant world, the eternal world, the world that doesn't change. In the world of the *nirmanakaya* there's always coming and going, arising and falling, and things are changing; in the *dharmakaya*, there's no change, there's a kind of eternal, present moment. Between them is the *sambhogakaya*, the body of dreaming, the liminal body between those things; where there is imagination, creativity; where things have emerged out of the vastness but they haven't quite taken form yet; they still have a kind of plasticity and changeability to them.

In the *nirmanakaya*, the world of form, time is linear. We talk about time's arrow, that we have a sense of the past, the present, and the future, and that we're moving along this arrow; and we're here, we're alive, and we're going to get *there*, and we're going to be dead. There's a linearity and a cause and effect to time. In the *dharmakaya*, it's eternal. There is no time at all. There's only this present that goes on and on and on, and doesn't change. In the *sambhogakaya*, in this in-between state, there's no cause and effect; in imagination and dream, things happen that aren't supposed to happen. They're not supposed to be connected or bouncing up next to each other. Because there is no cause and effect, there is no this and then this and then this and then this. There's more this wild juxtaposition of surprising things which is how metaphor and imagination work.

When the *nirmanakaya* is in the foreground, which is a lot of the time, we think about past, present, and future; we think about things coming and going. When we grieve the death of someone else or the anticipation of our own death, what we're really grieving is that something was here and then it's not. Or we can imagine that something that is here now will not be here at some other time. That's a very *nirmanakaya* kind of experience. It's here and then it's not here,

and my reaction to that is grief. There's nothing wrong with that at all. That's absolutely the fullest expression of our nirmanakaya experience : we deal with things rising and falling and changing; we deal with having and not having, having and losing; things we are attached to, people we love, coming and going. Sometimes grief is the absolutely right, full, complete, nothing-missing nirmanakaya response.

I'm not talking about replacing that view with a better view, but I am talking about adding something, about seeing that the nirmanakaya view is one of three, so it's about a third of what's true. We can mix in the other two, so that we have three different views of what it means to lose either someone else or ourselves.

In the dharmakaya there is no coming and going. There is no rising and falling. There is no change in that way. What is here is always here. It doesn't leave. And that's also true. I mentioned a couple of weeks ago this conversation where someone who was going to become a great teacher was leaving his teacher, and his teacher said, with some sadness, "Once you leave, it will be difficult for us to meet again." The precocious young man responded, "It will be difficult for us *not* to meet again." That's the view of the dharmakaya. *It will be difficult for us not to meet again.* Once having met, we are always met. We have always met and we will always meet. Again, Abe Masao says of this, "Today does not bring us closer to eternity, but today, at this moment, eternity is completely manifesting itself."

When you have these three views together, you realize that today doesn't bring us closer to eternity in the sense of being a day older and so a day closer to our death, or possibly a day more mature in our practice, so we're getting closer and closer to eternity through our practice. Actually, in the dharmakaya aspect of things, eternity is already here, and already completely manifesting itself in every moment. If we can touch that, if we can realize eternity manifesting in every moment, right now, at the same time that we realize that things rise and fall, and that we gain and lose all the time, then we have responded to Furong's exhortation that we settle the matter now. There is something you can know now that will make a complete difference, and then no matter what happens, living or dying, it's all right. You will feel a kind of freedom and ease.

If eternity is completely manifesting itself right now, that means that our death is also already manifesting right now. Our death is not something that awaits us in the future; it's already here. What's it like to imagine that it is not some unknown, surprising, disconcerting thing in the

future, but already here, already existing? Already, we are accompanying it and it is accompanying us. We're not waiting for anything to happen; it's already happened.

There was a teacher named Baofu and when he was on his death bed, his attendant asked him, "If it should be that your time has really come, which would you prefer, to go or to stay?" Now that it is right down to the nitty-gritty : Would you rather go, or would you rather stay? Baofu just shouted at the top of his lungs, "Dao!" The monk, who I want to find and ask to be at my deathbed, said, "In that case, I won't disturb you any further." I don't know about a good death, but that's a well-accompanied death!

When Baofu shouted "Dao!" it seems to me that he was saying that eternity is already here! He was just naming what was already true : there is no coming and going, or if there is a coming and going, fundamentally it doesn't matter. It's already eternity manifesting itself in this moment, and in the next moment when I stop breathing it will be again. What does coming and going mean in the context of Dao — completely present, completely here?

One of the places we feel the poignancy of death most is when people we love die. As we get older that becomes a more and more common experience, so we have this feeling of *Ugh. It will be hard to meet again. I won't see you again, I won't hear your voice again.* Then we have this answering voice saying, *It will be hard not to meet again.* They are gone and they are here. We are gone and we are here. Both things are true.

There's a beautiful question and answer in the koans. Someone asks, "What about the ones who neither come nor go?" The question is about bodhisattvas who don't come and go in the ordinary sense. So, what about that state when you have touched eternity, when you have felt the dharmakaya, when you know that everything is already right here, and everything will already be right there, in the moment of our death? What about when you don't worry about rising and falling, coming and going, in that way? The answer is, "The stone woman calls them back from their dream of the world."

The first time I heard that I wanted to put my head down and just take a nap. How fantastic that we get to be called back from our dream of the world. The stone woman is an old Chan image of the vastness, so the vastness — this great woman who does not change, who is eternal, made of stone — calls us back from our dream of the world. It seems to me when you juxtapose this question with this answer, you're not repudiating anything; you're not saying you have to pick one viewpoint or another. At the same time, yes, they neither come nor go; in their hearts,

they neither come nor go. In their hearts, they have settled the Great Matter and are at peace, so there is no back and forth, here and there. And, and, and ... at some point the stone woman will call them back from this dream of life, this dream of the world, and they can rest. That's true, too. Both things are true, and there's such a richness in that, such a rich view of what life is and what death is.

In the Tibetan language, the word they chose to translate emptiness, *shunyata*, the vastness, from Sanskrit, is a word that in Tibetan means the sign of something that was here but is gone. If there is a place in the grass where there is an indentation because an animal spent the night there, that's that word. If there's a place in the field that's a spot where nothing's growing because a house stood there and burned down, that's that word. It's the traces of something gone that we still can see. We can see the traces, and through those traces, connect with what was once there.

If we could imagine when those we love die, that what we experience is not a tear in the fabric of things, but a place where the grass still shows the impression of their having been there, then perhaps we can connect with the large view that they're now experiencing. In the tea ceremony, there's a beautiful thing where the second person who's going to drink says to the first one, "Please, you go ahead of me." And, so, if we say to those we love, "Please, go ahead of me," and we can connect with that sense of a trace of them that is left, maybe that trace can become not just a location of mourning and of grieving, but a portal into that much larger place that they are in now. Can we connect to the vastness through that trace of them left in the world around us? Can we let their sudden and complete largeness pull an answering largeness from us, in our lives now?

The most consoling thing I ever read about death is from Rilke. He said, "Death is not beyond our strength. It is the measuring line at the vessel's brim. We are full whenever we reach it." There is no half-full vessel; whenever you reach the measuring line at the brim, that's full, whenever that is. Can we hold that for other people? As other people die, can we hold that their vessel was full? Can we accept that about our own lives, whatever their span, that the vessel is full?

When I think about the dying of people we love and our imagination of our own dying as a portal into the vastness and not just a place of grieving, I think about the Korean teacher Soen Sanim's fantastic suggestion-when he was asked "What do Zen people do about death?" He said, "I really have only one piece of advice to give you. As you're taking your last breath, ask 'How can I help?'" One of the millions of ways that that's so powerful to me is it's to recognize that it's

just another step. It's not so different. If we would have asked before that, "How can I help?", why not ask after that "How can I help?" Why not have that continuity between living and dying? Why not go with that attitude, not *Oh my god, here we go!* but *Here we go ... How can I help?* What will persist? What will not persist? What will happen?

Just finally then, to remember that we have often asked, as one of our fundamental questions in our practice, *Do you trust your life?* Which is a very deep inquiry : Do I fundamentally trust life? Not to give me what I want all the time, not to satisfy my ego's needs, not to always be grand and wonderful and helpful and pretty, and all of that, but do I trust it? Do I fundamentally trust it? And I would add to that question, *Do I trust my death?* Whatever it's going to be, however it appears, do I trust that? Some of us can see our deaths rise up from the ground and start walking toward us the moment we get a diagnosis or something happens like that. Some of us don't; it just happens in an instant. But, whatever the case, can we trust that in the same way that we trust our lives? If in our practices we have come to trust our lives to a greater extent, through this work we're doing together, can we extend that to include trusting our death? Can we extend that to trusting our living-dying existence? Not making that separation, healing that apparent duality, so that there is a one trust of a one existence, in this moment and in that moment, and in every moment in between, and probably afterwards as well?

Q1 : I've never really paid attention to Steven Jobs, but I was listening to NPR today, and he said, every day you should ask yourself, am I doing what I really want or love? If I'm going to die tomorrow, am I doing what I really want or love? And if I'm not, then I should change that. It seems like it fits right in with what you were saying. I was really taken aback and, it sounds cliché, but I never remember to ask that question.

JIS : I was reading an essay by a woman about death, and she said, she had always thought that question was really important, and now she was also considering its opposite with every choice, she was asking herself, "If I'm going to live a really long time, how do I feel about this choice?" I thought that was great, too.

Q2 : Why are there so many different practices, like the Tibetans and the Catholics, with a different idea about death? I just want to thank you for the simplicity of what you just did. I remember reading to a friend of mine who was dying, not the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* but the follow-up one, and it was saying you cannot die well if you don't have a teacher. And I remember

stopping, right in the middle of it, and going *Ughhhhh*. Why would I be reading this to a woman who doesn't have a teacher? It seems so wrong. How you presented it is very, very soothing.

JIS : Thank you. I don't know what a good death is, and I don't know what a bad death is. I know that for each of us there is your death and my death, and that's all we have. You have your death and I have my death. That's what we have. Good? Bad?

Q2 : If we say it's supposed to be a certain way, how difficult is that?

JIS : If we can't show up for our own death, what are we going to show up for?

Q3 : What do you mean when you say trust?

JIS : That's a good question. I would love to throw that open to people who have been working with that practice. What have you discovered about what that word 'trust' means in this context?

Q4 : When I know what's happening is ultimately for my benefit.

Q5 : I was listening to Steve Jobs last night, the commencement address he gave at Stanford six years ago, when he was first diagnosed with cancer. And he was saying that if he wasn't feeling good about where his life was going after two or three days, then he's not doing the right thing. And, for me, it's that sense of trust : if I'm not feeling good about things, then I trust that I need to do something different.

Q1 : I think it has something to do with authenticity and integrity. You trust your life when you're living your life as you, not as somebody you made up.

Q6 : I find myself contemplating trusting being in the moment, trusting what happens when I make that intention to be present, and letting go of the self; and that kind of openness and vulnerability that also, hopefully, I'll be able to maintain around the time of death. And also it kind of brings me to something I wanted to say about shunyata. That trace of something that was there and now is gone? And so, what is that like when I live that moment when a part of me is dying, and how do I look back on that experience or how do I experience the shunyata of my own existence?

Q7 : What makes sense to me is somehow meeting whatever is walking towards you. For me it feels like the ultimate test of *Am I trusting my own life?* is something about getting out of your own way. Whatever is coming towards you is you at the same time. When I am able to meet it, it often feels truer, it feels trustworthy. It feels authentic, like you're not managing things.

Q8 : Trust is somehow letting go of the 'I,' you're so not alone. There's a sense of the undoing and allowing.

JIS : A couple of times ago we were speaking about a sense of fundamental separation that people can feel from their own lives, from life, from the way things are, and that that alienation is the source of so much of our suffering. I was suggesting that there's a koan dialogue which begins with Linji asking a nun, "Welcome? Not welcome?" It feels like that question is another way of asking the question, *Do you trust your life?* Do you fundamentally feel welcome or not welcome being alive? When you can answer, wholeheartedly, 'welcome,' that's trusting your life.

Q3 : So, if I feel welcome in my life, there's this sense of I'm welcome in my life and there's something welcoming me. One of the words I wrote down was 'meeting without fear.'
Undefended, openhearted, accepting, without armor. I think about so many things where there's so much conditioning and defendedness in my own daily life. And it's all so busy, right? All that maneuvering. It just seems incredibly profound to feel deeply welcomed and welcoming with life.

JI S: You're talking about all the busyness. If that's fundamentally true, and you're afraid, that's okay. You can welcome fear as well. And M's beautiful, simple phrase, you can walk towards it, anyway, even though you're afraid. You don't have to set things up perfectly in order to welcome and be welcomed. It's *you*, right?