





Chris Pirsig's funeral, Nov. 25, 1979 - Excerpt from Wendy Pirsig's journal, photos from unidentified Zen Center member(s). Pirsig family members included, in addition to Chris's father, Robert Pirsig (called Bob here); his mother, Nancy James; brother, Ted Pirsig; grandfather, Maynard Pirsig, and myself, stepmother.

...Then there were steps down the hall, and toward us came an entourage of priests. Baker Roshi wore a spectacular brocade, embroidered gold and white reaching below his knees. On his head and made of the same brocaded material, a gigantic hood formed a peak a foot or more above his head. After a short greeting he disappeared into his room and the trail of priests followed.

After we'd sat quite a while Reb Anderson came out, and repeated instructions for the funeral procession, turning to each of us as he described what we would carry. As he talked to Nancy and said, "And you will carry the ashes," he simultaneously, very softly, touched his own chest, a seemingly unconscious gesture probably simply related to the fact that the container would be wrapped in a sling around her neck and would ride against the upper part of her body, but seeming for an instant to make a connection with Reb's own body.

About that time, Bob reached into his pocket and said to Reb, "Here are Chris's beads I wanted to give you." Reb took them with a smile, slipped them rapidly on his left wrist. As they disappeared under the sleeves of his robe he gave Bob a deep gassho and Bob responded in kind.

At the last minute we discussed whether to wear shoes. Of course nobody does in the Buddha hall. I think we were told we "could" leave them upstairs if we wanted. Maynard, not catching the drift, kept his on, and as Bob and I had spoken of sticking with Maynard on the chair issue, out of respect for him, we kept our shoes on too. (Bob ended up removing his.)

The things we were to carry were brought to us. Chris's ashes were a small bundle tied in a large white napkin. Later Bob said Nancy turned to him at that moment and whispered, with a look of anguish, "They're so light!" and Bob replied, "Nancy, they're just ashes."

I was to carry Chris's treasured calligraphy that Katagiri Roshi had given him when he left Minnesota. I wanted to make sure not to accidentally hold it upside down, and Maynard helped deduce the correct orientation by the hanging wire on the back. Then Katagiri Roshi went by, and he didn't react so I knew I had it right. At last we formed a line and started downstairs. "Within nothingness there is an inexhaustible working."

The funeral was spectacular and will be nearly impossible to describe. As we filed down among the couple of hundred people, there was absolutely no sound except for a two-tone bell, one tone struck after the other. The bells were held by the priest leading the procession. Several seconds elapsed between each strike, first the high tone, then the lower tone. Both notes were quite high and silver-clear and, it seemed, sad. We were told later that this is used for many special occasions, but we had never heard it and it will forever have a haunting association with Chris.



I think Nancy and then we followed Baker Roshi. Also in the procession were Katagiri Roshi and Murayama Sensei in blazing red and white and blue robes. We didn't know until that moment that Muryama would participate. Just as we turned to enter the Buddha hall a flash bulb popped. The photographer got Bob, Ted and me but Nancy was not in the photo.

The Buddha hall was specially arranged with an altar at the east wall instead of the north. We were coming in after everyone had been chanting a sutra. Reb led us to our places in front, took the things we carried, gasshoed, and motioned us to sit down. From the altar, we sat in this order: Nancy and Ted on low zafus, and on chairs, Bob, Maynard, me, Judy, and Geraldine.

We were given programs which began:

Final Ceremony of Crossing Over For Christopher Pirsig

November 25, 1979

Beginner's Mind Temple

Opening: 18 Hits of Densho Bell

Reading of the Maha Parinirvana Sutra

Procession to the Altar

with Family members carrying Christopher's ashes
memorial tablet

photograph for concentration

and a treasured possession

Incense offering by the abbot (doshi)

First statement by the abbot...

Baker made the statement facing the gathering, with Katagiri and Murayama facing the altar on high, oversized chairs that were bright red and ornately painted. Reb stood behind Katagiri, helping to seat him by lifting his robes as he sat down; he needed to almost climb into the tall chair. Another priest helped Murayama. Katagiri was the closer to us, and both he and Murayama wore stony expressions. They held ceremonial whisks, long sticks with soft flaxen plumes. The funeral calligraphy Katagiri had painted was there, four sections in Japanese on long vertical white paper:

Everything is impermanent

That is the Dharma of Origination and Destruction.

Origination and Destruction end.

That is nirvana.

Over each of the four lines was a calligraphy representing:

Buddha

Dharma

Sangha

Treasures

Baker Roshi possessed much physical agility and moved with grace and fluidity throughout the service. He said that Chris had "died too young." He had expected that rather than performing his funeral ceremony, Chris would perform his.

佛諸行無常

法是生滅

僧生滅已

空寂滅為

CHRISTOPHER PERSIG



竹野氏山



法

空





Then he went on to say that as Chris had dedicated himself so intensely to becoming a priest, and had “asked me many times to ordain him,” Baker would now proceed to ordain Chris as a Zen priest.

Certain ceremonial things were read by Baker, with the moments Chris would have replied filled by silence. Some references were made to Chris’s *rakusu*, “which you have sewn so carefully,” and it was produced and placed over Chris’s ashes as though the bundle were wearing it.

In the ordination Chris was given a Buddhist name in Japanese and English. The Japanese name was written on the stick Ted had carried to the altar. I remember that part of it meant mountain. He joins a lineage tracing back to Shakyamuni Buddha.

The most dramatic part of the ordination was the symbolic cutting of the last hair of a new priest’s shaven head. Baker said, “Now I cut his hair,” and passed his hand horizontally through empty space.

The program continued:

Chanting of the ten names of Buddha by everyone
mindfulness of birth and death
first chanting of daihi shin dharani
dedication (eko) and statements by heads of practice (tantos)
second chanting of daihi shin dharani
meal offering by the ino...

This portion became completely ritualistic, building up a kind of magic. The light in the room seemed to take on a sourceless orange glow. There were bells and chanting and drums and incense and candles and costumes blending into many Japanese and mystical English phrases, and the profiles of the two oriental magicians, Katagiri and Murayama and also of Reb.

The rest of the ceremony was a celebration of passage. It was not a sad time. I had a strong sensation of triumph on behalf of Chris, joy that it all was so BIG, such a BIG noise was being made for him.

The program said:

Offering of hot water by Katagiri-Roshi
Offering of tea by Murayama-Sensei...

This was the handling of the funeral symbols at the altar, dedicating them to Chris, and it was high magic, completely in Japanese. Katagiri and Murayama each knew his role by heart. At the end of each chant, spoken loudly to the altar, each gave an unearthly yell. The supremely



controlled Katagiri raised his voice in a mix of anger and agony and to hear it was chilling. Murayama followed, and his cry was unbelievable, beyond human, beyond emotion, horrible and frightening, as though from another world.

The program continued:

Great Flame Mudra

My memory of this was that someone, perhaps Baker Roshi, stood before the altar and swung a torch in a wide vertical circle as a drum roared and softened with each rotation. The torch was artificial, the flames of red paper, but the effect was very strong.

The program continued:

Dharma words for leading to Nirvana (indo-hogo) by the abbot

The abbot asks for statements from other people...

Baker Roshi's "dharma words" were spoken to Chris as though he were hearing, though I can't remember what they were. Roshi ended by calling upon anyone to make whatever statements they wished. And then voice after voice began speaking from out of their various places in the room. What struck me first was that even though sounding from amid the dark wild forces of death and magic, each voice was so young, so American, so close to Chris-the-boy. They were the other Zen students. So rhythmically came each unembodied voice from here and there, that at first I thought it had been rehearsed. Like Baker, each one said Chris's name. Many thanked him for various things. "Chris, thank you for never forgetting to bow in the hallway..." "Chris, thank you for playing so much rock and roll..." "Chris, thank you for teaching me how to hit the bell in the morning..." "Chris, thank you for lending me your hair clippers..." "Chris, we were friends for three beautiful months..." (That was a young woman.) "Chris, thank you..." (A boy, nothing further.)

All the voices alluded to Chris's perseverance, his strict ceremonial practice, his love of ceremony, his talent for mechanics and helping people fix their cars, his engaging smile.

People not from Zen Center joined in.

"Chris," said a male voice, "the only way I knew you was through the book. I would have liked to have known you more..."

"Chris," said a woman's voice directly behind us. "Meegan would have liked to have been here today to be with you again." I started as I recognized the name of Abigail's daughter and realized Abigail must have joined us.

By now the room was filled with the sound of sniffles and blowing noses. A few more students spoke. Next to me I felt that Maynard was crying. Katagiri and Murayama still sat in their chairs like ramrods, their whisks propped motionless against one arm. I glanced at the profile of Baker. His head was bent forward facing the altar, and a large single drop of liquid clung to the tip of his nose.

I hadn't expected the family to speak, especially myself, but suddenly there was Ted's quavering voice, and it led the following sequence.

“Good-bye, Chris,” called Ted, his voice breaking. “I was your brother.”

“Good-bye, Chris!” Bob called. No clinging now though, no sadness. It was as though we were standing around watching Chris climbing onto a pony.

“Good-bye, Chris!” I called a second later, without thinking. Chris was on the pony, turning onto the prairie and waving his hat.

“Good-bye, Chris,” said Maynard, his voice dry and shaky. “Your grandfather will never forget you.”

A few other statements followed; Judy may have said something too. At last, after a few beats of silence, Baker Roshi intoned a few other things, including: “Chris, you died with such violence it makes me sick!”

The program continued:

Entering the Path of Nirvana (santo nenju) by Katagiri-Roshi

Chanting of the ten names of Buddha by everyone

Dedication (Eko) by Katagiri-Roshi

Chanting of en mei juku kannon gyo by everyone

During this chanting, members of Family and Some others will offer incense...

We hadn't been warned this was coming, but now, as voices of chanting hummed and throbbed all around us, Reb went to the altar, gasshoed, pinched some incense, brought it near his forehead, put it in a little box of burning incense, gashoed, and then turned toward Nancy, gesturing with raised eyebrows and a hand. She rose and did what Reb had done, and so in turn did Ted, Bob, Maynard, and I. The altar was a blaze of warm orange, very powerful with the photo of Chris's face and the remains of his body and a sign with his Japanese name.

Then, after I sat down the chants still continued, from somewhere behind us came a tiny old Japanese lady in a black kimono, padding softly up to the altar. Bent at the waist and hunched over, she seemed no more than four feet tall. Her black hair was swept back into a bun. Stopping in front of the altar she gasshoed and then, somehow conveying extraordinary attention to the altar and Chris's face, she offered incense too. Then she turned and took two steps till she stood in front of Bob and gasshoed. Bob did too. And we knew this was Okusan, Mitsu Suzuki-Sensei — Suzuki-roshi's wife.

End of program:

Peaceful abode dedication (an i eko) by the abbot

Procession departs

I have forgotten most of Baker Roshi's last words except one thing he addressed to Chris that seemed very good.

“Settle,” he said. “Settle.”

This was what the funeral had been all about.

I think everyone else could file up and offer incense too then, while the five of us, plus the roshis and tantos and Okusan, followed the two-toned bell out and up the stairs again. Baker Roshi said good-bye to us. We got warm greetings from Katagiri and Murayama. It was a happy moment, time for them to see that we were grateful to them and vice versa. Okusan met us for the first time. In a dry, light voice she spoke with halting and heavily accented English. Her face was found and full, with wrinkles. She smiled fully, yet her smile was not giggly or even really cheerful. There was an underlying seriousness or even toughness.



The first thing Maynard whispered when at last they all disappeared into their dark doors, leaving us out in the upstairs hallway again, was, “Who was that older woman?”

Reb told us we could go to a reception in the dining room, so we did. It was an ordinary college dorm-type dining room, and teacups and cookies were set out on the long tables where Zen students normally eat. We family members separated for much of the reception, dissolving into the crowd, sipping and talking.

It was remarkable to stand in a room of 100 or more and not hear a harsh voice, or see a single frown or leer or greedy expression. In so many eyes there was the sparkle. Afterward Bob liked to comment how when Zen students get together in San Francisco, the whole room sparkles and twinkles with lights.



不念

念

一物中
念

大忍

