

Dying Together

From a lecture by Katagiri Roshi, January 7, 1989

We must all face the reality of impermanence. It is a difficult situation because we don't know how to deal with birth-and-death. We don't know how to deal with the person who is going to die, as well as we don't know how to deal with ourselves. Today I would like to make a few points.

The first point is that we have to deeply understand human suffering. Suffering and pain never go away. Even though you attain enlightenment—even though you become a Buddha, a bodhisattva, or a saint—suffering and pain never go away. The more deeply you are a bodhisattva, the more you see the minute vibration of suffering coming up from the depths of your heart.

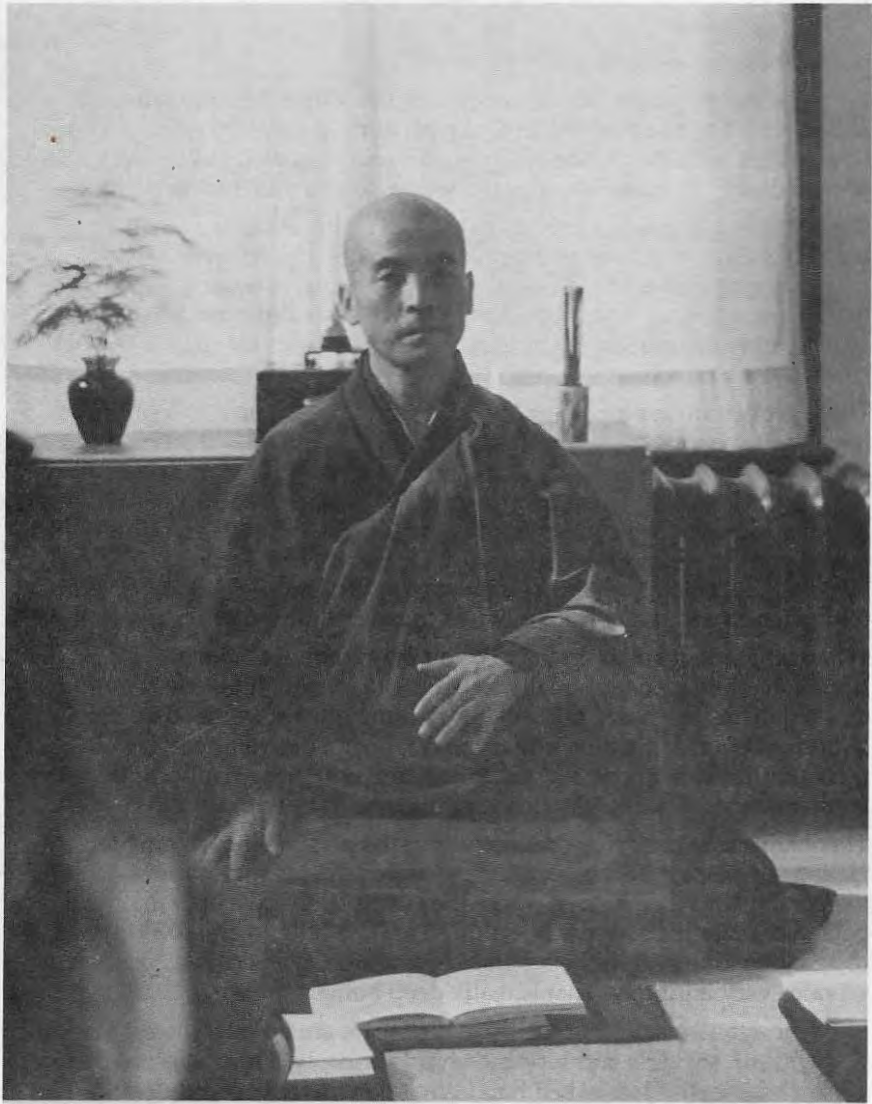
There are certain preconceptions that when you become a Zen priest you have to die peacefully or in a sitting position. However, I think that there is, strictly speaking, no particular pattern of how to die. It is completely free. You may have an idea of how to die, or an image of what is a happy death. But there are no guarantees when you really face death itself. No guarantees. At that moment there is no space for you to look at death objectively, because you are right there. You must be alive there. So you still have to understand how to live from moment to moment. It is not so easy for us.

When you face death as it really is, you may compose a poem. This expression of death in a poem is really an exquisite scream. It is very beautiful, and it touches our heart, but still it is nothing but a scream. So human suffering is not something you try to create or try to remove—it's already there. Particularly at one's last moment, deep suffering really comes up and is conspicuous. That is why it is very difficult to be with it.

There are many complicated emotions in the person who is going to die: feelings of despair, sentimentality and anger. This is very natural. Finally the person reaches the stage where they completely give up. Finally the person realizes that there is no solution and nothing to grasp. This is called resignation. Still within the realm of resignation, the person's consciousness vibrates very minutely. That is really deep human suffering.

Even though you say "I am ready to die" there are no guarantees. Maybe you will still struggle and scream "help." Probably. There was one Zen master whose disciples asked him "What do you think about death?" The Zen master said, "I don't want to die." But the disciples did not expect such a statement because they believed that their teacher was a great Zen master. They thought that a Zen master should say "I am happy to die." I don't think it is so happy, you know. The Zen teacher is very straightforward toward death. This is to say that you should understand really deep human pain and suffering. Otherwise you cannot be there.

The second point I would like to make is that you should have the feeling of togetherness. When you think about death, when you examine your idea of death, you feel some separation. But that is just an idea. In terms of true reality there is no separation. You and the person who is dying are exactly one. That is why you want to be there and serve him or her. If the person wants a cup of water you can give it. You can do it.



There was a person who was going to die who wanted to see Zen master Ikkyū. This person asked Zen master Ikkyū, "Am I going to die?" Ikkyū said, "Your end is near. I am going to die. Others are going to die." This is very important. Zen master Ikkyū says nothing particular to make the person feel comfortable. Still they can share. The person who is going to die can share his or her suffering with us. We can share our suffering with him or her.

You are going to die. Also I am going to die and others are going to die. Zen master Ikkyu's statement comes from deep understanding of human suffering. When a person is facing his or her last moment, then you can really share your life and death. This is why I say that you should have the feeling of togetherness. It is not the idea of the feeling of togetherness. You should do it. This is practice. You can hold the hands, massage the back, serve the cup of water, or just be present by him or her. This is actual practice of the feeling of togetherness.

If your heart is very warm and compassionate, even though you don't say anything, your presence very naturally affects the person. However, this quality of feeling cannot be gotten overnight. You have to practice this day to day. This is why I always mention everyday life. Even though you do not like it, you have to do it. Even though you do not like him or her, you have to take care of human beings with compassion. This practice really affects your life and makes your personality mature. In other words, it makes the persimmon ripe. Everyday life is made up of innumerable small, seemingly trifling things we can do. This day-to-day practice is very important for us.

The third point I would like to make is that we should constantly be in the realm of oneness. The Buddhist way of understanding the world is a little different from our usual way of understanding the world. According to our ordinary conception of human knowledge, we first separate and classify all the entities in the world. Then we analyze, again and again, all the numerous different beings. Finally our analysis comes together at one point and we can see the sameness of all things. However, in Buddhism it is a little different. In Buddhism, before we separate—trees, pebbles, mountains, rivers, oceans, skies, all sentient beings, all things visible and invisible—all are originally one.

In terms of our usual, commonsense understanding of human knowledge, if I say "this is one," at the same time another being is over there separated from this one. But in terms of the Buddhist way of understanding, if I say "this is one," that means I already accept oneness completely from the very beginning. All beings are one, before you poke your head into the concept of separateness. In terms of our usual understanding, "this is one" means that this one being is nothing but one of all the beings within the realm of separation. But in terms of the Buddhist way of understanding, "this is one" means that this one being is all within the realm of oneness. One is all. In other words, one is exactly one. That's it.

However, if one is exactly one, that means if you are exactly you, you don't know it. At this moment, who are you? What can you say? You have no idea. But reality is exactly clear. Trees know it, skies know it, all sentient beings know who you are, because you are already within the vast realm of universal existence. All you have to do is be there.

The Buddhist way of understanding the world makes it clear that it is not necessary to have a certain view about life and death. This means that we shouldn't have a particular idea of what is a happy death. One person is struggling and screaming in his or her last moment, another person is praying to God, another person is chanting the name of Buddha, another

person is expressing anger and hatred. That is fine. Whatever way a person dies is fine.

The point is that our mental or psychological framework of death must be very light and flexible, no matter what type of death we are in. In other words, we must be right there in the middle of the broad scale of the universe. This universal realm of oneness is completely beyond our speculation, beyond good or bad, right or wrong. It is nothing but an endless stream or dynamic flow of energy. All we have to do is just be there. This is the last moment. This is why the last moment is very quick. This is it. This is why when you are exactly in the last moment you don't know it. In Buddhism this is called Dharma, or totality, or the whole universe.

Dogen Zenji, in the *Zenki* essay of his *Shobogenzo*, mentions that "Life is the total manifestation of life. Death is the total manifestation of death." In other words, life and death are nothing but the momentum of energy which is beyond your speculation. We should believe in oneness, totality, sameness, wholeness. But this so-called principle of Dharma is still a little bit abstract. There must be a person who receives and accepts Dharma, and who makes Dharma alive in his or her life. This is the so-called Sangha or person who actualizes Dharma in day to day life.

You should understand that oneness needs you. Dharma, totally, really needs you, whoever you are. Oneness is naturally open to everyone, and it needs you always. This is why we have to deal with it and make it alive. The moment when totality appears in your life is called *ki* in Japanese. *Ki* is usually translated as dynamic work, or device, or vital opportunity. Still we don't understand. There are no English words. *Ki* means...oh, how can I say it?

Do you know the American television series *Bewitched*? (laughter) Oh, I love it! (laughter) This woman is supposed to be a witch. Whenever she wants to do something, she always moves her nose, like this (Roshi imitates, laughter). At that time, I always feel that I want to pinch that nose (laughter) before she does it. At that very first movement of her nose, I want to pick it up, I want to pinch it. That is called *ki*! (laughter).

We always have to return to the first moment of our activity—*zazen*, *gassho*, moving the nose. When we come back to the first moment, if we can grasp it, pinch it, that is called *ki*. At that moment you can really experience sameness or wholeness. This is very simple practice. Already, we are there, but usually we don't pay attention to it. This is why everyday practice is important. Moment to moment you have to deal with all sentient beings, then all sentient beings are coming back to you and supporting your life. You need all sentient beings, all sentient beings need you. This is our practice.

So when the time comes for you to face death, you have to return to the very first moment of death. Dogen Zenji, in the *Shoji* essay of his *Shobogenzo*, says "This birth and death is the life of the Buddha." We should practice this again and again. We have to return to the silent source of our life and stand up there. We have to come back to the realm of oneness and make it alive, with a feeling of togetherness with all sentient beings and a deep understanding of human suffering.