

begin his talks with “Good evening, bodhisattvas.” That’s what we’re here for, to be awake beings. And awake beings are awake to the deep connection we have with everything, with all living beings. We are all of one life, and we need to take care of that life so that it continues generation after generation.

IT’S ALL ABOUT LOVE AND JOY

I got a call that a dear friend of mine, who received precepts from me years ago when I lived at Green Gulch, was dying. I arranged with her husband to go and see her and give her the precepts again. One of the things that have been very helpful to me around this matter of birth and death—around this matter of my death, anyhow—is meeting death with great curiosity. What is it? We don’t know. We can’t know ahead of time. Can we be there for it and find out what this great mystery of birth and death is? When I went out to visit my friend, Jenny, I said to her, “Well, Jenny, it looks like you’re going to find out about the great mystery before Pete and I do.” She was on a hospital bed in her room, but she jumped up and threw her arms around my neck and said, “Blanche! It’s all about love and joy!” This was less than a week before she died. And so I thank you, Jenny, for that teaching. It’s all about love and joy. Can we allow that as a possibility in our heart as we study this great mystery? I know that I find myself, the older I get, imagining whether I could say such a thing on my own deathbed, but it certainly is what I’ve been talking about as I’m approaching my deathbed. That love and joy are really right here and available for us if we will open up to it. And I think familiarizing ourselves with the Buddhist teachings and especially the teaching on loving-kindness will help.

I received an e-mail letter from Jenny’s husband when she died. When they said good night, she said, “I’m going to meet the mystery.” Those were her last words to him. So, I offer you this

line, “I want to be full of curiosity,” because it’s been a great sustainer to me over the years.

HOW TO LIVE IF YOU’RE GOING TO DIE

I came to practice because I discovered that I was going to die—me, personally. I just had never considered it before, but then my best friend, who was my age and had kids the age of my kids, had a headache one night when we were together. It was such a bad headache that she went to the doctor the next morning. She was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor; went into a coma; and died. *Whoosh!* Maybe a month altogether from the first headache.

Well, that could have been me as readily as Pat. “Oh, my God! I’m going to die!” But the next thought was: “How do you live if you know you’re going to die?” It has been such a gift to me that that question came up. And so I started looking for who could tell me how to live if I know I’m going to die. And I do know I’m going to die. So I’ll just share with you these Five Daily Recollections from the *Upajjhatthana Sutra* of the Buddha:

- I’m of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old.
- I am of the nature to have ill health. There is no way to escape having ill health.
- I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death.
- All that is dear to me and everything I have and everything I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape from losing them.
- My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground on which I stand.

These Five Daily Recollections seemed to be, for me, some clue to how to live if you know you’re going to die. Pay attention to

how you live. Pay attention to your actions. Are your actions kind? Are your actions honest? Are your actions supported by the desire to help beings, to benefit beings? Are your actions selfish or generous? How are you living this life?

PEACEFUL REPOSE

I chant every morning a sutra to the bodhisattva of compassion for the well-being of people in the *sangha* who are sick or people whom I know who are sick, and also for, as I say, the calm crossing over and peaceful repose of those who have recently died. Yet I found that when I was chanting just for Lou, my late husband, I was torn about calm crossing over and peaceful repose or many rebirths in which to continue your life, your bodhisattva vow. I wasn't sure of such things. But his death caused me to pay more attention to those words.

When I'm chanting for him, that's what comes up for me: the questions of calm, peaceful repose and rebirth. He was quite sincere in his bodhisattva vow to practice for the benefit of all beings, so I imagine that he may experience calm, peaceful repose and rebirth.

Lou and I once rode together with a Tibetan teacher who was giving a workshop on dreams. Lou was very aware of his dreams and felt there was great significance in them. And in the course of driving down to the workshop and back, somewhere in the conversation Lou said something about himself, and Tarab Tulku Rinpoche said, "Oh, well, that's because you were a monk in a previous life." Now, Lou was so focused on being a monk—not a teacher, not a scholar, not a priest—just a monk. Perhaps he wanted to go on having many lives being a monk until the bodhisattva vow, of ending the suffering of all beings, was no longer necessary. Anyhow, I really appreciate Shohaku Okumura's comments on death in his book *Realizing Genjokoan*:

Firewood becomes ash. Ash cannot become firewood again. However, we should not view ash as after and firewood as before. We should know that firewood dwells in the dharma position of firewood and has its own before and after. Although before and after exist, past and future are cut off. Ash stays in the position of ash with its own before and after. As firewood never becomes firewood again after it has burned to ash, there is no return to living after a person dies. However, in buddha dharma, it is an unchanged tradition not to say that life becomes death. Therefore, we call it "no arising." It is the established way of Buddha's turning the dharma wheel not to say that death becomes life. Therefore, we call it "no perishing." Life is a position in time. Death is also a position in time. This is like winter and spring. We don't think that winter becomes spring. And we don't say that spring becomes summer.

THE GREAT MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

Throughout Dogen Zenji's teachings, the question of birth and death, or life and death, is called "the great matter." On the *han* [a wooden board struck with a mallet] that calls us to the zendo, we have this quotation that's often chanted every night in a monastery in Japan: "Great is the matter of birth and death. All is impermanent, quickly passing. Wake up! Wake up, each one! Don't waste this life." There's a sense of urgency to understand about life and death, and that's what Dogen Zenji is speaking to. Common parting words to someone who's leaving are, "*Odaiji ni*"—please take care of the great matter. It's very central in Buddhist teachings.

"Life and death" is an English translation of the Japanese expression *shoji*. As a verb, the Japanese word *sho* (that is, the