
ENJU:
The Infinite Black Abyss

Aiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!
When the great scream
Resounds throughout the whole universe,
Place your palms together and bow your head.

KOAN

Enju's husband and their only child, thirteen-and-a-half-year-old Seth, were visiting Seth's grandparents in Florida. Her husband returned home early, and when it was time for Seth to fly home a few days later, he boarded his flight. On his way home, the plane crashed in Denver. Seth was killed.

Of this time, many years later, Enju says, "An infinite black abyss opened, and a force shoved my head into it. I plunged into a blackness that is always here, but you don't have to relate to it, if you are lucky."

Her teacher said, "Enju, there is a Jizo Bodhisattva in the garden that needs a new cape."

REFLECTION

A devastating loss. Unbearable grief. A blow that obliterates you completely. There are small changes in life that are easily negotiated, and then there are sudden, catastrophic upheavals of such magnitude that the life you have known is no more. Loss consumes you.

The Buddha saw that everything is in constant flux. My teacher, Maezumi Roshi, liked to say that "we are being born and dying six and a half billion times every twenty-four hours."⁴⁶ Then he would ask, "How can you live such a life?" "And yet," he would reply, "you *are* living it." This transiency is called birth-and-death. Zen Master Dogen writes that birth and death are the life of the Buddha. My Zen teacher taught that such a life has different dimensions: There is the conventional birth-and-death, in which we were born one day, are living now, and one day will die; there is the spiritual birth-and-death in which self-centeredness diminishes and the awakened mind comes to the fore; and there is the life-and-death of each moment. The journey of grief encompasses all of these.

Kisagotami lived at the time of the Buddha. When her little child died, she lost her mind with grief. She carried his lifeless body to Shakyamuni Buddha and begged him to bring her child back to life. The compassionate and wise Buddha said, "First, bring me a mustard seed from a house that has not known death." Kisagotami carried her dead child from house to house in her village, moving among people she undoubtedly knew and who knew her and her child. They invited her in, offered tea, and bore witness to her grief. Not finding one household that had not known death, she began to accept that death is what is. You know this,

and yet you don't quite know it until it happens to your child, to someone close to you, or to you yourself.

You expect things to be a certain way rather than how they actually are: a child dying before his parents, or a spouse before yourself. Nor do you expect to become suddenly seriously ill, or lose your main source of income, or watch your house and belongings gathered over a lifetime burn to the ground. There is no end to the kind of losses you may endure. You may even lose your mind, as Kisagotami did. Isn't that one of your biggest fears, the unraveling of your life's narrative?

The death of a child is a searing loss that no one should ever have to endure, and yet people do. When a heart is shattered in this way, there is only *this*, and words that are achingly hard to utter. There is also the healing power of kindness. Enju and her husband were surrounded by good, caring friends who supported them through countless acts of kindness. First were all the many immediate tasks that needed doing. Then there was the living through, moment by moment, one foot in front of the other. After a few months had passed, a friend introduced them to a rabbi, who over many more months sat with Enju and her husband, receiving them just as they were and listening deeply to their grief.

Can you yourself hold the space for someone else's suffering? Being witnessed is so crucial for healing on every level. Kisagotami's healing likely began when her neighbors invited her into their homes and bore witness to her grief. The good rabbi did not turn away from Enju and her husband, a couple he did not previously know. Do you have the capacity to hold the space for such pain, when being the listener can take you to your own edges?

Grief has its own fierce force; there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Even within a family, each person's grief journey is unique

to him/herself. How do you live with these individual rhythms of grief, however they manifest for you or for someone you know?

Enju said: "An infinite black abyss opened, and a force shoved my head into it." What is this infinite black abyss? What is this place of infinite bottomless darkness, this unrelenting, universal life force that claims us to our essence? In Zen, the emptying out of the self is called the Great Death. This is a spiritual death, a self-shattering experience in which there is only timeless infinity. Zen master Keizan Zenji, describing his own experience, said, "A black ball rushes through the black night."⁴⁷ I recall one of my teachers saying, "Nowhere, nobody."

Enju herself said, "I plunged into a blackness that is always here, but you don't have to relate to it, if you are lucky." The loss of a child calls forth a deep surrender, which can lead to profound openness and vulnerability. In her book *Bearing the Unbearable*, Joanne Cacciatore writes: "While grieving the death of someone loved will last a lifetime, if we are able to remain close to our original wound, honestly, being with it and surrendering to it, we can experience a kind of transcendence, a transfiguration."⁴⁸

An ancient koan asks: "How is it when a person who has died the great death returns to life?" The Zen master replies, "You must not go by night, you must go by day light."⁴⁹ The life force is unrelenting even in the midst of great loss: The sun rises and warms the earth, new green shoots poke through black lava beds, and a tiny pink bud appears on a bare branch. At the same time, rebirth does not obviate death. Today, Enju and her husband are parents to two beautiful adopted daughters.

At the Zen Center of Los Angeles, a hand-carved stone statue of Jizo Bodhisattva, the great being that takes care of children after death, sits below the winter pear tree among the delicate

irises. It sports a red cape knitted by Enju, who tends to the Jizo in memory of Seth. Now and then, one sees that a fallen leaf has been tucked lovingly into the folds of his cape.

How are you tending to life-and-death, moment by moment?

When everything falls apart, what then? What has emerged for you from great loss? The infinite black abyss—what is it?