
Greg's Body

"Are you old?"

"I guess I am."

"Are you going to die?"

"I guess I am, but not yet."

"Don't worry, you'll do it really good."

KOAN

Greg had struggled for decades with post-traumatic stress disorder since being stabbed with a nine-inch knife in the 1960s at the age of sixteen. Thirty-five years later, when meditation practice and psychiatric treatment had finally begun to stop the horrific flashbacks that had tormented him for so long, Greg's doctor told him he had terminal cancer and would die within the year.

Upon hearing this diagnosis, Greg asked, "What will become of my body?"

REFLECTION

When we become ill, we realize that we're not that important. There are projects to work on, deadlines to meet, families to attend to, and instead we have to lie in bed and rest. Does the world stop? It does not. The work finds a way to go on, or else it doesn't. At home, the kids may be disappointed, but they too continue to live their lives. We're like snowflakes: highly individualized, exquisitely designed, and melting away almost as soon as we hit the ground.

What will become of my body? In fact, who and what is this body that fades and weakens, turns pale, doesn't want to get up in the morning, aches, loses appetite, looks out the window for hours at a time, finds it hard to focus on simple things, feels hot, feels cold, gets pain attacks, can't sleep, becomes feeble? Is this body *me*?

Once, this body was the good parent, the successful breadwinner, the aspiring musician or painter, the disciplined jogger, the sexy man or woman who at times felt on top of the world. Now this body can't feed, wash, or toilet itself; evokes expressions of pity on people's faces; and is ignored by the staff members of a nursing home or hospital. Its food preferences can't be indulged, its beautiful clothes are replaced by hospital gowns, the independence it was proud of is gone like yesterday's rain, and one self-image after another drops into the wastebasket of irrelevance.

What is this body? Who am I?

This had been Greg's question not just once, but over a lifetime. In that lifetime he seemed to get blindsided again and again. Isn't that true for many of us? You work hard all your life and look forward to a leisurely retirement, only to get bad news from your doctor. It's one hardship after another—your mother is ill,

your husband is fired from his job, a fire burns down your house—and still you assure yourself that there's light at the end of every tunnel and everything will turn out okay in the end. The truth is, one never knows.

Bearing witness never ends. One day your heart won't break, you tell yourself. You won't suffer anymore; you'll finally achieve equanimity thanks to your deep meditation practice. As if Nirvana is some numbed-out state where nothing hurts, nothing scratches, and you wear a smile on your face day in, day out.

Or else you look for resolution. One day it'll become clear, everything will make sense, and you'll be able to tell the story of how it all went down and how much you learned and realized towards the end of your life. *One day one day*, as Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach loved to say. We spend a lot of time creating such stories.

Sometimes we think we've found our life's meaning while mountain-climbing, or in a poem or during a retreat, out of which a deep sense of clarity and balance emerges that we believe nothing, but nothing, will ever upset again. But the very next day that hard-won story or meaning doesn't feel so relevant anymore, and we're back to the old question: So who am I? What will happen to my body?

The Buddha didn't address questions such as an afterlife, or what happens after death. He came out of an Indian culture that believed in reincarnation, but the Great Physician's teachings focused on suffering and delusion: how they arise, and how they can end. But in the *Lotus Sutra*, one of the most famous of Buddhist sutras, the Buddha says that he has been teaching people how to awaken for millions of years, though historically it's only been some two and a half thousand years: "In order to save living beings, as an expedient means I appear to enter nirvana but

in truth I do not pass into extinction, I am always here, preaching the Law."⁴⁵ Due to their delusions, people don't see him. But when the time comes, and suffering beings thirst for his teachings, he reappears to teach again.

How is this possible? The Buddha was a vessel for teaching and transformation. He died in his eighties, but he continues to be that vessel many generations later. His body was cremated, but what was his essence, and where did it go? Isn't each of us a vessel for transformation?

That is what Greg was asking, and maybe what many of us ask as well. Once our bodies go, then what? There is much we don't know, but one thing is clear, and that is that the results of our actions go on and on. The Buddha, Christ, Mohammed, Moses, and the Iroquois Peacemaker all lived and taught for a relatively short time, but the effects of those lives continue to resonate everywhere.

The value of our actions is immeasurable, and it transcends our human lifespan. Do we have to be among the world's great teachers? Any moment now, we come face to face with a child needing boots for winter, an animal hit by a car on the road, someone needing help to pay the rent or get a job. Doesn't our response live on, not just in our life, but also in our family, our community, and in the world?

Are you concerned about the future? If so, what is your practice now? Where will your body go?