

## **Seeing the True Dragon**

Before the beginning of each session of zazen at Ryumonji, the Doan strikes the han, a wooden board hanging in the Buddha Hall, that has the following verse painted on it:

**Life and Death are the Great Matter**

**Impermanence is Swift**

**Awaken to this Reality**

**Practice without Delay**

I suspect that most of us lean a bit more toward the word “life” than “death” in the first line of the verse. In the past months, with the global death toll resulting from the spread of the coronavirus mounting each day, we are forced to look more directly at the word “death” than is our usual habit.

I find this time of social distancing and sheltering at home to be a time of contrasts. Our days seem simultaneously quieter and more distracted by the ever changing news. While the human experience is currently one of uncertainty and fear, the world around us is breaking into life. While the daily news bears a grim message, the days themselves are brighter, the bird song louder and more varied, the crocuses are emerging from last year’s leaf cover. We are staying at home more than is usual, not opening our homes to guests. But the reality of Covid - 19 is threatening to join us as an uninvited guest.

Last Sunday in his Dharma talk, Shoken told an old Zen story that seems to have particular meaning now. Long ago, there was a man in China who

made his living selling Dragon trinkets. If he were alive today, I imagine his shop would be filled with dragon statues and nick-nacks, dragon calendars, dragon mouse pads, stationary, dragon posters. He likely thought he knew something about dragons, perhaps thought the images of artificial dragons that populated his store conveyed something true about actual dragons. Then one day, uninvited, a real dragon stuck his head into the window. The shop owner was horrified and fled in terror from the real dragon, his images of dragons being of no help to him when faced with the real dragon

We can be much like the shop owner when it comes to death. I suspect that each of us has spent some time thinking about or imagining what our own death might be like. Perhaps we have imagined a quiet death, surrounded by our loved ones, with sufficient clarity, free from pain or medication, to say goodbye to those closest to us, perhaps share last words of love and forgiveness. While I think there is a place for us to imagine what kind of death we would like, we need to be careful that we do not become attached to this story of how matters might unfold. This is just an image, it is not the true dragon facing us through the window.

I suspect as well that most of us practice with the aspiration that we will learn to live with more compassion, we will become kinder, more generous. We imagine that we practice primarily so that we can live better. We cultivate compassion and loving kindness, qualities that at once reflect our deep connection with the universe, and simultaneously bring us to the realization of our connection with universe. We practice because life is the urgent matter. We practice dropping off mind and body; we practice letting go of likes and dislikes. We practice not picking and choosing, welcoming in each moment what life has to offer with equanimity. This is how a Bodhisattva lives.

But how does a Bodhisattva die? I think a Bodhisattva dies in the same manner in which he lives. The Bodhisattva practices because death is the urgent matter. There is the dropping off of mind and body. There is the

letting go of likes and dislikes, no more picking and choosing. The Bodhisattva welcomes the moment of death as what life is offering in this moment.

At the end of the Fukanzazengi, Dogen speaks directly to us saying, Please honored followers of Zen, long accustomed to grasping for the elephant, do not be suspicious of the true dragon. Devote your energies to a way that directly indicates the absolute.

When we choose to live following our likes and dislikes, when we pick and choose our way through our days desiring our own comforts, the completion of our own agendas, we are grasping after the elephant, and may become suspicious of the true dragon.

While we aspire to the qualities of the Bodhisattva ideal, we work with the everyday stuff of our lives, the relative concerns of daily matters, the tasks at hand. When we bring our full intention and attention to the matter at hand and in hand, when we live wholeheartedly, we are also devoting our energies to a way that directly indicates the absolute, the ultimate reality of our intimate connection with universe.

The Bodhisattva ideal is a path. It gives us direction for how we are to live our life which includes our death. Any moment we live wholeheartedly with what life is offering is a moment in which our energies directly indicate the absolute. Death is also what life has to offer. One of these moments, for each of us, will be the moment of death. We see them as opposites, but life and death are universe arising.

I am reminded of Emily Dickinson's poem"

Because I could not stop for Death -  
He kindly stopped for me -  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves -  
And Immortality.

We do not want to stop our lives for death. And life has a way of seeking life, of desiring its own continuation. I marvel at old trees that are damaged, and scared, but courageously pump life into one or two vital branches for as many seasons as possible. I have watched injured animals struggle and kick for the next breath. But I have also watched animals die with peace and a certain knowing and acceptance of what life is offering. They show no fear nor resistance.

At the monastery, we are reminded daily that life and death are the great matter. In this time of Covid-19, the true dragon has become more real to us than usual. It has already entered our community. We are not likely to look or act the same in six months as we do now. Practice is more important now than ever. This is the time for us to cultivate the qualities of the Bodhisattva: we practice dropping off mind and body; we practice letting go of likes and dislikes. We practice not picking and choosing, welcoming in each moment what life has to offer with equanimity. This is how a Bodhisattva lives. And this is how a Bodhisattva dies. The Bodhisattva lives wholeheartedly. The Bodhisattva dies wholeheartedly.