

FROM LECTURES BY DAININ KATAGIRI SENSEI

One of the students at Zen Center sent me a letter and some poems. She really confronts death, day in and day out. Her husband takes care of her, but he cannot take care of their children too. He had to separate from his children and send them to his parents. But day after day, her mind cannot escape from the voices of her children, as if they were playing in the garden or in the playground. She cannot help but listen to their voices. Sometimes if a dog barks outside, the dog's voice turns into their voices. She cannot escape from it. On the other hand, she has to listen to her own voice, bubbling out her sickness, her death.

In her poems she says "there is nothing, only the monologue of pain—and in a few minutes, behind it, just silence." Just silence exists. We should contemplate this point. She means that if you confront death day in and day out there is no room to make a complaint, there is no room to fear death, no room to discuss the subject of death, because you are in the midst of death; your life is occupied by death. But though there isn't room to discuss the subject of birth and death, you cannot help but discuss the fact that death is in your mind. You have to ask yourself what death is.

The more you reflect upon yourself, the more there is left just death in the midst of your life. But you continue to constantly seek for what death is. It seems to me that your effort is like seeking after your own tail. It's all right to seek, to chase after your own tail. After continually chasing, chasing death, at that time, as the student said in her poems, "in a few minutes, behind it, just silence".



In the domain of this silence there is something that you have to accept. What seems to exist is just a monologue of pain, of death, of the suffering coming from death. Within this world you have to walk step by step. At this point death is not a matter for discussion. You have to suffer from death because death exists right here, right now.

This life is not a matter for discussion from your own viewpoint. You live in the midst of life and death and suffering because they exist, really. That's why Buddhism says accept your life and understand how the world is with imperturbable composure. To be imperturbable is to walk step by step by step. This is a hard thing, but you can accept it. Even though you suffer from your daily life so much, just accept it, just listen to the silence, the voice of your steps, with imperturbable composure. This is Buddhism. . . .

While you look at the subject of death through discussion you cannot have a real understanding of death because you are always looking at death, actual death, as an on-looker. If you do it in this way it is really impossible to understand the subject of death.

As the student confronts death she is completely tied down by the suffering which emerges from her disease. Nobody wants to die, and I think that in her mind she is always shouting "I want to escape from this problem," and praying to Buddha, to God, "Please help me." But unfortunately, even though she prays to God, to Buddha, in reality it is impossible for her to save herself from suffering. All she has to do is look at the advance of the disease. Even though she cries, she screams, the disease is going on regardless of her suffering. The more she struggles with it the more the suffering gradually increases. At last, all she can do is just accept it, with silence.

I think everybody suffers from something if they are alive, because life itself is suffering. But most people look at the problem of suffering as on-lookers. In the case of this student's suffering, coming from death, from confronting death, it is impossible for her to see her suffering as an on-looker. If you see your suffering from the outside, as an object, you can't know that you must really accept your life situation. Your knowing is still in the going and coming between your conception and reality. Actually, you always think "I don't like it. Don't give me suffering. I don't like trouble." The trouble doesn't exist, you know, on the outside, apart from yourself. The suffering exists within yourself. Though you say "Please don't give me trouble," trouble comes up to you regardless of your struggle. Then, just listening to the silence between no-suffering and suffering is not enough. . . .

As a human being you exist just at the intersection of time and space, which means just in the midst of the contradictory world; just in your own reality in which you are situated. I think you will notice how you feel. Behind the screaming and the crying there is nothing but the existence of silence and the acceptance of your own existence. So the student said in her poems, that on the one hand she realizes the monologue of pain that is raging in herself, and on the other that she cannot move an inch. That's her reality. Behind both facts, she said, just silence exists.

I think this is the real truth. But to sit on the chairs of silence is not enough to realize what you are and who you are. Everybody can sit on the chairs of silence and tranquility, on the chairs of understanding transience. Actually, every time you encounter the various phases of human life it is possible to understand what a human being is. Through your experience, I think, you can see that understanding transience is not enough to improve your life in the future. Understanding tranquility or silence is not enough to elevate your life. You have to *develop* silence and tranquility. The understanding of silence and tranquility on a higher level is the actual practice. In other words, give it life, vivid life. . . .

Buddha teaches us that we have to have the Big Mind. Then what is the small mind? The Big Mind as taught by Buddha has nothing to do with the domain between big and small. Even though you think you understand the Big Mind as taught by Buddha, I think this understanding is still floating between your notion of reality and Reality itself. You say "I don't like this," but the suffering doesn't move.

For the sick student, the most important thing is that she expresses the decision to continue to listen through her everyday life, through the taking care of, through the benign and cheerful treatment of her disease, of her death. Listening to the silence, to the silence and the tranquility, is not merely a notion—it should be bound up with our everyday life. . . .

When you see the subject of suffering through the function of the brain, your understanding of suffering is wandering in the domain of notion, of the distinction between suffering and no-suffering. But if you express the decision to continue to practice as a *Bodhisattva* it elevates your life situation, elevates it to a higher level, the level of union of suffering and no-suffering.

I think this student who confronts death knows, she alone knows, what death is and how long life is. In the *Lotus Sūtra* it says, "Only a Buddha knows the Buddha's world." The same is to be said of the student who confronts her own death. Even though you can feel the feelings of her suffering, feel "poor lady" and give her lots of sympathetic words, even though she receives many thousands of sympathetic words, they cannot save her from her suffering. No one can really understand the situation of her suffering. No one but herself can understand well what death is, what she is, who she is. . . .

We don't listen to silence and tranquility simply by having that notion. You have to express the *decision* to listen to this silence and tranquility beyond the no-suffering and the suffering of our everyday life. At that time you can experience bodily what silence and tranquility is. When you experience silence and tranquility, your activity, as expanded into your daily life, is regarded as the *Bodhisattva's* practice. But even though you realize your practice in the domain of suffering as a *Bodhisattva's* practice, you still find yourself crying out, suffering, saying, "Please help me." Still, the more you experience this in silence and tranquility, the more you will find your activity as a *Bodhisattva's* practice. This is called in Japanese *gyo-gan*. *Gyo* is practice and *gan* means vow.

This student said to me one day, "All I have to do is to take care of my disease, putting my full energies into giving benign and cheerful treatment to my disease, and at the same time practicing the Buddha's teaching." This attitude is very important. If you suffer you want to escape from it, and if you just listen to the notion of suffering you will despair. You will think, "I give up, I give up everything. I don't want to do anything at all." This is because you understand yourself always as a subject, as an on-looker to the suffering. You are the subject and your suffering is an object. Then you say, "I don't like suffering," but the suffering doesn't leave you. It is part of yourself and cannot be escaped. Suffering just smiles, regardless of your suffering. But when you experience this suffering bodily and express the decision to continue to listen to the silence behind it through your everyday life, you will find yourself becoming brave, continuing to be alive, continuing to move in the direction of the future. Then your steps towards death will be taken firmly.

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(Dainin Katagiri Sensei first came to America in 1963 when he went to Los Angeles and then, five months later, to San Francisco where he helped Suzuki Roshi with the Soto Zen Mission at Sokoji Temple. As the assistant to Rev. Suzuki he was deeply involved with the Japanese congregation, and very busy. In addition he sat with the Zen Center members and began, in 1964, to lecture regularly at Zen Center, alternating with Suzuki Roshi there, and later at the affiliate zendos in Los Altos and Berkeley. After Tassajara Springs was purchased by Zen Center in 1967 Katagiri Sensei took over all of the duties at Sokoji during Suzuki Roshi's stays at Tassajara, and led the rapidly growing Zen Center community as well. It was during this time that students began approaching him as their personal teacher.

Upon Suzuki Roshi's retirement from Sokoji and Zen Center's purchase of their own city building, Katagiri Sensei accepted the students' invitation to join them on a full-time basis, leaving Sokoji to devote himself to Zen Center and, in addition, to teaching a class at San Francisco State College. The students are very happy with Sensei's decision to stay with Zen Center.

The preceding were excerpts from Katagiri Sensei's lectures given at Tassajara during the Spring Sesshin, 1969.)