

BIRTH AND DEATH

Today a few friends Janet and myself went to the beach to spread the ashes of a friend, Sidel Scott who died recently and her husband Jack who died several years ago. Few words were said by those who felt like speaking, but mostly it was very quiet and very beautiful. I chose to say nothing. I didn't see a need to say anything touching or profound. I have discovered that what is most touching and profound is found in silence.

It is the human condition that we don't understand death and that we fear death. Partially we fear death because we don't understand it and partially because of instinct, the fear is built into us.

I am not really sure but I suspect that Sidel had little fear of death. She knew she was going to die several weeks ahead and openly talked about it while maintaining her usual joyous demeanor. Several years ago, after Jack died Sidel was very distraught and consequently did a short private meditation retreat. For many many years she practiced meditation daily for an hour but rarely sat for longer periods. As she was returning from the retreat in a moment of contemplation on the subject of birth and death, recalling the words spoken to her by a zen teacher "no birth no death", she experienced Kensho and resolved all questions on the subject.

I hear many friends say it is impossible to know what happens after death. We might have faith in the souls continuity and indestructibility as we die and believe in reincarnation or an afterlife in another realm like heaven. But we Buddhists don't believe in a soul. We don't even believe in an individual self. From this perspective it might seem that when we die we just die. The zen master Dogen writes in his essay Actualizing The Fundamental Point

Fire wood becomes ash, and it does not become firewood again. Yet do not suppose that ash is future and firewood is past. You should understand that firewood abides in the phenomenal expression of firewood, which fully includes past and future and is independent of past and future. Ash abides in the phenomenal expression of ash which fully includes future and past. Just as fire wood does not become firewood again after it is ash, you do not return to birth after death.*

Of course Dogen is not quite correct. Ash does become firewood again as it fertilizes a tree and our dead bodies also fertilize life which may become a human. This is the cycle of life. But his point is that when we die we die. The elements that compose us as individuals will disperse like firewood becomes ash, and yet understand that there is a deep causal (karmic) connection between past present and future. This seems like a bitter pill but that is only because we really don't understand what we are as human beings.

We Zen Buddhists believe that it is possible to resolve our questions of birth and death, to truly know without resorting to faith. Through the experience of Kensho we can clearly understand birth and death. This experience completely re-frames the way we think about birth death and life. It does so in a way that though we may not believe in a soul or an individual afterlife, death is not forbidding.

As we sat on the beach after Jack and Sidel's ashes were spread I looked out at the vastness of sky and earth. A small plane flew in the far distance. I looked out and knew that this vastness which stretches to the end of the Universe is my true body and my true mind, and is also Jack and Sidel's true body and mind. There is no birth and no death nor is there an individual who is born and dies.

We think of ourselves as individuals limited by an individual body and mind. Caught in our small bodies we feel isolated but this is not at all true. We live in the Ocean of Being embracing us and penetrating us all the time. We breath air and ingest food and fill with the energy of life. Light penetrates our eyes and fills us with visions of life. Our ears hear the sounds of our true body. Our skin feels the evening breeze, the warm sun and the cold of winter. Where are the boundaries?

Everything we do, everything we think, results not from our isolation but through the infinite

web of cause and effect. Our isolation is an illusion. We are filled with thoughts of “I” “I” “I” and think we are autonomous with something called freewill, but this is just the way we think, it is not the truth. It is an illusion. As Buddhists we intellectually learn this but are still not quite free of the illusion. Only with Enlightenment do we truly understand the illusion of individuality as illusion, and thereby gain some freedom from our thoughts of “I.”

The insight of Kensho is not just an insight into the illusory nature of the self it is a redefinition of the self not as nothing but as everything. With Kensho we become the whole Universe. When we look with our eyes and hear with our ears we are not experiencing the “other”, we are experiencing our True Self. My friend Sidel knew this and consequently was not afraid to die.

There is no birth, no death, only the True Self..

When the Buddha contemplated the nature of the individual human he thought of the human as being composed of the Five Skandas, form, feeling, impulse, consciousness, and perception. He thought that each of these skandas was in turn composed of multiple elements. skanda means aggregate. What is absent from this analysis is a soul or spirit. For the Buddha the individual was a complex of natural elements that come together through the process of cause and effect and will in turn decompose back into it's natural elements. But, if I may be so bold, Shakimuni did leave one thing out of this equation, that which binds the skandas together into the human being and animates the human while it is alive and when it is gone the human quickly disintegrates, the vital life energy, chi. Maybe it is because I practice in the Zen tradition which has passed through China with it's strong cultural focus on chi but also because of my own experience of chi through meditation that I mention chi. Most of the other meditation traditions in Asia do have a similar understanding whether they call this energy Prana or kundilini.

Through meditation my experience of chi has become very pronounced. Because of this experience I do not see the individual human as just a very complex mechanical system as modern medicine tends to see the human. And I do not think of chi as just the energy of this system as acquired through the processes of respiration and digestion. Chi has a universal nature. It is all around us and enters us not only through our food and breath but through all five senses. When light hits the eye it not only stimulates a signal from the nerve cells in the eye but inputs energy as though the nerve cell is a solar cell. The same is true of our other senses. Chi is simply the life energy of the Universe around us as it penetrates and animates us. It really cannot be separated from the form of things. My background in physics tells me that matter and energy are not really different but only appears to be different. And my realization through meditation tells me that even space should not be separated from form and energy. One might call it all the Ocean of Being

I have grown to think of the human body as a vessel for this life energy. When my mind is quiet and there no longer is a constant stream of I thoughts it appears that the chi is in charge and not some autonomous “I.” The chi flows through the body and the body follows doing what it needs to do. Through meditation the body increases it's store of chi and we can become sensitive to it's flow. When the body is tired or old or sick or deeply injured it holds less chi than it did when it was young and healthy. When we die the last remnant of chi has left the body. and everything stops. Not even the individual cells continue to function.

All of this does not ultimately change the outcome of Shakimuni's analysis. I am only adding my subjective experience. Chi can seem like some sort of inner spirit or soul but it is really just energy. The outcome of Shakimuni's analysis is that we are in process, constantly changing, and like all compound things eventually we will disintegrate and die. There is nothing in us that is permanent like a soul that will go on from life to life.

And yet in a deeper sense we do not die. In the spring rhododendron blossoms fill the mountain sides with white, pink and red.. In the Fall the Maples leaves become a bright yellow. Why be scared our true body lives on. All things are contained in our true body. This saha world is contained in our true body. Birth and death are contained in our true body but our true body does not die. It is existence

itself, the Ocean of being, life itself, which is our True Self and does not die as our limited individual self dies. All my many years of meditation and search for spiritual understanding it is this truth which is the greatest truth, the identification with our True Self, that I have to pass on as a Zen teacher. When we truly identify with this whole thing, and see all individuals and all things as manifestations of our True Self and all activity as the activity of our True Self, then what is there to fear. Without fear we become instruments of the Universe and the love and compassion which is our individual endowment blossoms.

* Kazuaki Tanahashi translation.