

Ring Around a Rosy

Dharma Talk by Ven. Shikai Zuiko O-sensei
Dainen-ji, February 8th, 1997

[The Sensei sings softly:] “Ring around a rosy, a pocket full of posies. Achoo, achoo, we all fall down.”

Listen, can you hear that?

[Singing again more loudly:] “Ring around a rosy, a pocket full of posies. Achoo, achoo, we all fall down”

“Ring around a rosy, a pocket full of posies. Achoo, achoo, we all fall down”

[The Sensei imitates children’s voices in the distance] “No, it’s my turn now, let it be my turn”

For six hundred years, English speaking children have been singing this little ditty as they play. You can hear them: Little girls and boys singing. You can picture them: Perhaps at a birthday party, perhaps in the summertime, outdoors. Sunshine falling on their variously coloured little heads.

“Ring around a rosy, a pocket full of posies”, isn’t that sweet? And aren’t they having such a good time. Singing their little song about death. Because that’s what that little song is about. We’re told it’s a nursery rhyme, a little game for children to play. They hold their little hands, go around in a little circle, around a person who’s in the middle, and when “we all fall down”, well we all fell down. The last person to fall down went into the middle and we began the game again.

The ‘rosy’ of the rhyme “Ring around the rosy” originally referred to the red bumps or pustules that would form on the faces of people who had contracted the plague. “A pocket full of posies” was about the pomanders (some of which were oranges with cloves inserted into the peel), and the bunches of lavender or other sweet smelling flowers and herbs that were carried around in pockets or in ‘nosegays’, particularly the nobility. The aristocrats held their sweet smelling nosegays in front of their noses as they went about their daily business through the corpse ridden, putrid streets of London.

“Achoo, achoo”? Sneezing. Sneezing, a sign, yet another sign of approaching death. If you were sneezing and you had the ‘rosies’ on your body, well, the next thing was that you were going to fall down. Fall down. Go boom. Dead.

Our children’s stories and songs have come down through the ages by word of mouth. Their original meaning has been changed or even lost over time. This one “Ring around a rosy” is a sign of , a remnant of, a deception that has been going on for as long, I’m sure, as human beings have been going on.

The deception begins early in our lives. It’s part of our human attempt to deal with the reluctance, the recoil, the reactivity, that we all seem to have about birth and death, and life.

I’m dying.

You’re dying.

We’re all dying

All of us were born without asking, without being asked, without our knowledge or consent. We were all born. Most of us don't remember much about our birth because we didn't 'know' it. Not as we know this moment. Not as we can know the feeling of the breath as it breathes in, fans the ribs, causes the shoulders to lift ever so slightly. Not as we can know the seeing of the wall. Not as we can know the hearing of our neighbor's breathing. Not as we can know the feeling of the left hand cradled in the palm of the right hand, the feeling of the thumbs touching. We can know our life. So we can understand how, in a sense, we weren't really present for our birth. We weren't aware of it, as we are aware of this moment. Birth and death arise together. They're inseparable. They arise within and as life.

The day before yesterday, which was my birthday, the Roshi and I were talking about death because of my preparing for this Dharma talk. I had said: "life and death arise together. They are inseparable." And the Roshi wrote the following on my page to make it very, very clear how reality is, "Death is part of how life lives. Death and life are not opposites or even equals. Death is part of how life lives."

Life never dies. You will and I will and everyone else will, but life never dies.

So here you sit facing the wall, eyes open. Breathing out you breathe out. The breath, the life that was you dies and is gone forever. As you breathe in the nostrils widen, the rib cage expands, the spine lengthens. You can feel your heart beat. The heart muscle pumps blood through the lungs, the oxygen you have just breathed in passes into your bloodstream and is pumped to your brain, your internal organs, to your eyes, your ears, your fingers and toes, to the skin inside your elbows, to your tongue. Right now you are alive. You can know that. You breathe out. You don't know if there will be another breath. So fragile, so tender, trembling and teetering on the brink of...

One day there will be that final wisp of breath leaving the bodymind. I'll be dead. One day there will be that final wisp of breath leaving the bodymind. You will be dead. And you will be dead, and you will be dead.

What is it? What dies? Who dies? Life doesn't die. What a shame it would be to die without being aware of it. What a shame it is to live without being aware of it. But you're here and you're alive and you're aware of it. You know it. Not as a concept, which is usually how we tend to view it before we begin to practise. Not as the things you did in the little movie you remember of what was going on in your life before you got to the zafu. Not as the little movie that plays itself on and on about the things that you will do after you get out of here, after you get off the zafu. But when you practise, you are practising this very moment, this life that is living you.

So there you sit, being breathed in and out. The skull, the spine, the hands, the fingers, the space around the fingers, the beating of your heart: That is your life. And you can know it: When you're practicing. And isn't it amazing, here you are practicing. How did this happen? What did you do that afforded you this priceless opportunity to practise and study your life? To look into, moment to moment, how you are. To find out who you are.

In "Living With This Breath", a Dharma Assembly on Death and Dying, Zen Master Anzan Hoshin said:

When we are intimate with our experience as a whole, with our life as a whole, when we are completely embraced by life, we can begin to come to grips with death. When we can attend to what is, without creating another, then we can begin to look into this issue of death without falling into reactivity. Without trying to console our selves with mystical promises, and without viewing it as some kind of void. Then we can begin to

understand death as part of what life does, as part of the activity of life.

Death, the one thing in your life you can be sure of. And most of the time you, but not just you, nearly everybody, wants to pretend that it's not happening. Gosh, you know, our finger and toenails are made up of dead cells. Our hair, that hair upon which some of us spend and have spent so much time and money, is made up of dead cells.

"Timor Mortis": fear of death, is something as old as human history. Fear of death is fear of something which is the inevitable lot of each and every sentient being, of each and every one of us. We don't like to talk about death in any real terms and yet every day we're surrounded by information telling us in various ways of the deaths of untold numbers of beings, real and fictional. It flickers in front of our eyes. It rings against our eardrums. We pass a newsstand, "278 died today". Well we know that's not true. Far more died today than the 278 in that one plane crash. We watch the evening news, and turn it off with a sigh of relief. Television news watching has become a ritual now, a kind of ritual of affirmation. If we're sitting here watching the news we know that we didn't die on this day because we're watching the body count. FFFFEWH! "Made it through another one". Can go to bed safely, be tucked in and hopefully fall quickly into a deep deathlike sleep.

I find it curious that there are no little undertaker kits for kids. We have little carpenter kits, little baking kits, little sewing kits, but there are no little undertaker kits. There are no little 'divine outfits' for Barbie, for going to the funeral. Yet kids want to know about death. They want to know what happened to Sam the hamster lying there at the bottom of his cage. And they want to be told what's going on. The quest for the answer to the questions "what is death?" and "will I die?" and "why do we die?" does begin when we're very young. The answers we get? Embarrassing fabrications and fairy tales such as being lifted up into the blue sky in some sort of loose white night gown and popped on to a white fluffy cloud to play a stringed instrument for eternity. Other responses can be: "Don't ask, just don't ask. We don't talk about it." Or children are told not to worry about, 'you're not going to die for a long, long time.'

Death, from the point of view of many scientists and lay folk, in a kind of basic materialist view, is bleak beyond despair and a cause for great anxiety. In practice, in this practice, we're all familiar with the term self-image: views that we have of our self, and how we are, and how the world is. Views, which if they are fed into, distort this moment of experiencing, distort our life. Self-image spends its whole life acquiring things: Story lines, beliefs, objects, money, love, costumes, masks and it does this in a vain effort to prove that it exists. That it is special, enviable, immortal perhaps. Considering how reactive self-image is to being questioned about anything for fear of losing what it doesn't really possess (as I'm sure you all know from your own experience) and considering how anxious you become when you lose a key, or some money, a job, your looks, it's not surprising that the fear of death, of losing everything including your 'self', is so pervasive.

Sometimes our fear is the subject of humour. As Woody Allen said: "I'm not afraid to die, I just don't want to be there." It is widely considered to be in very bad taste to joke or speak lightly about death. In earlier times there seems to have been a much lighter touch. In pioneer days, in the colonies in Canada and the United States, tombstones were often blunt in the stories they told. And in this bluntness there was often a touching humour. This, from the gravestone of a child: "If I am so early done for, what on earth was I begun for?" And on the gravestone of a 24-year old woman, inscribed in 1792, was this: "Molly, though pleasant in her day was suddenly seized and went away. How soon she's ripe, how soon she's rotten, laid in her grave and soon forgotten."

Death; something everybody does but no one wants to talk about , especially if it's actually going on in the immediate vicinity. Anger is a fairly common feeling expressed to thanatologists, those who study death and the process of dying. It's fairly common for people who are dying of a terminal illness such as cancer, to have a lot of anger at: guess who? The loved ones, the nearest and dearest, who either make the dying person feel bad and guilty by crying and carrying on: "Don't leave me! What will I do without you? Oh no how terrible!" Or the more optimistic type who insists on making plans for the cruise, for the adventure, the things we will do together "when you're better darling". The patient, the soon to be dearly departed, knows that they are the soon to be dearly departed, and what is being ignored makes them very angry. They are being ignored. Reality is being ignored. But then, that is what we human beings seem to like to do.

Students have asked very practical questions such as what they can do when they are with someone who is dying. What can they do to make it easier for the person that they are with. Practise, that's what all of you can do. That is what you must do. When you can see your story lines, when you can see where a feeling is turning into a feeling-tone, when you are contracting around self-pity which has nothing to do with the person you are with, the dying person, you can practise that and release it. Breathe with the person, touch them if they give your permission, hold their hand, wet their lips with ice or water. Just be there and practise. Give them the room they need to do what they must do.

What about if you're at a wake or a funeral? Practise; feel your breath moving in and out of the body, recognize, through having recognized your own capacity for getting into states, the states that people are in, and then perhaps you can be useful. Perhaps there is someone who needs to be looked after, or a Kleenex or a cup of coffee to be brought to someone. Practise. Find out how your loved ones want to spend the period of time up until their death, if they have a warning of it. Help them do what they want to do.

When you start to fall into your own story lines, your own states of fear about death and dying, the movies about "Oh how sorry they'll be when I'm gone" or "No, I don't want to go. No, not me. Please, please, not me." At that moment of seeing the movement of attention towards the thought, feel your breath rising and falling in the body, see the seeing, hear the hearing, practise this moment of your life.

The Roshi says, in "Living With This Breath":

Looking into birth and death means looking into our life and looking at our tendency to self-deception in regards to almost everything that we experience, allowing ourselves to be honest enough with that we have some opportunity for really answering it. But the kind of questioning that's involved here, the kind of answering that's involved here, has to be something that we do with our experiencing as a whole; with our whole body.

Dying is not like being asked to dance. You can't refuse. You don't have a choice. But you do have a choice in this moment. Practise this moment.

As a group, the human race often tries to pretend that it's actually possible for us to live forever. Maybe that's what will happen if we buy enough life insurance. Or at least it may possible for us to live for a really long time, looking good and maybe, as if we're only eighteen. It's all nonsense. We were all born and we are all going to die. And, you don't know when it's going to happen so feel the breath, see the colours, hear the sounds, practise this moment, practise your life.

Thank you for listening.

Hum hum, hum hum hum

Hum hum, hum hum hum

Hum hum, hum hum

Hum hum hum ...

[The Sensei hums the nursery rhyme and then strikes the floor with her shippei]