

Teachings on Death
Green Gulch Farm
Green Dragon Temple
Sept 2003

It seems that life has a superficial version and an ultimate version. These two versions are not really different. One version is where there are birth and death. Another version is where there is life, but there are no birth and no death. There is no birth. It is living without birth. So, of course there is no death. I hope it doesn't sound too disparaging to say that if you live in this superficial type of life where birth and death are appearing, and really believe that that's the way things are, then birth and death can be very miserable. We experience difficulty, not because of birth and death, but because of believing that it is real and attaching to it.

Living within the understanding of no birth and no death, and not attaching to that either, life is free of suffering, peaceful and harmonious. When we are not attached to this superficial version of life, we can look straight into that world and see where it seems to be being born and dying, and not be caught by it. We can be in that world too with serenity harmony and freedom. Part of the reason that this would allow us to live in the world of birth and death with serenity, is that we are happy to let go of the world of nirvana. We are happy to let go of the world of no birth and no death with the understanding that it's not really different to the world of birth and death. They contradict each other but they are not too different entities. They are one entity. Freedom of the world of birth and death is the world of no birth and no death. There is a meditation practice that has innumerable forms to help beings become free of getting stuck in the superficial version of life, as well as from getting stuck in the profound version of life. People have actually been able to become free of birth and death and get stuck there too. In the history of the tradition of the Buddha some people achieved a state of freedom from birth and death. But they thought that freedom was different from bondage and thereby became stalled in freedom. It stopped being living freedom. The meditation of the Buddha is constantly to move forward in life without attaching even to liberation. To become liberated from liberation is the Buddha's liberation.

Human beings are gifted with the ability to see things inaccurately. We are gifted with inaccurate perception. We see things that don't exist. We see substantial separations where there aren't any substantial separations. We look at situations where there are no birth and no death, where there is just life constantly flowing. But the way we see it is in such a way that we parcel it up, projecting images upon this constantly changing, pulsing, flow of life. It is changing, but it is not dying and it is not being born. We project images upon it so that we can grasp it and talk about it. This projection causes us to grasp it, to seek it, and to seek further grasping. Grasping and seeking in relationship to our life is the illusion of birth and death. We then project images upon those phenomena which result from projecting other images on those. We then cling to those causing further appearance of birth and death, continuing to grasp, hold, and confuse life with misconceptions about the way it is. We apply ideas to the way things are which actually never reaches them, never touches them. This gives us a way to capitalise on them which simultaneously isolates us from life. It doesn't really -but we feel like that. In this way we become frightened of a life which is separate from us and do various things to try to make ourselves feel safe within a life that has birth and death; a life with other beings that are separate from us. Part of the way in which we try to make ourselves safe from the world that we have separated ourselves from is to judge that

other form of life and see whether it is being nice to us or not. In a world with birth and death, we are constantly trying to judge whether people approve of us or not, and whether they support us or not. This is why it is so uncomfortable in a world with birth and death.... sometimes.

Zen practice is offered as a way to become free within birth and death. It is presented as a way of practice which can help us to let go of our misconceptions about what is going on. Sometimes, even when our conceptions are not misconceptions and even when they are correct conceptions, they are still conceptions. Even if our conceptions of things are correct conceptions, they are still not the things. So we have misconceptions and we have correct conceptions. Correct conceptions also separate us from things. Misconceptions really distort our understanding of things. We need to learn, somehow, to let go of our conceptual thoughts. Then we have a chance to see the way things ultimately are so that we may become free of birth and death. We may become free of birth and death as well as becoming free of the fear and unskilful actions that arise when we are not free of birth and death.

One way the practice is described is as having two sides. One side is called going to, visiting, or consulting with the teacher and also listening to the teaching. The character for 'listening' can also be translated as 'asking'. It means both listening and asking. So one side of the practice means going to the teacher, listening to the teaching, and consulting or asking about the teaching. The other side is called wholeheartedly sitting. In Zen practice many people practice sitting and do their best to sit wholeheartedly. This room is full of cushions and chairs for people to wholeheartedly sit. Sitting is, then, the exemplary opportunity for realising freedom from birth and death. So you wholeheartedly sit, and then when you are ready, you go visit the teacher. Then you listen to the teaching about the sitting that you are trying to wholeheartedly practice. You might tell the teacher about your sitting practice, and the teacher might say that that is your idea of sitting. That is not actually the sitting. It is the superficial image of the sitting. It is the form of the sitting- you got that right. But you haven't reached the actual sitting that is beyond your idea of sitting. Then you listen to the talk about that. You listen and you ask questions. Over some time your understanding of the sitting evolves to such a point that you become free of your ideas of the sitting, while you still have ideas of the sitting. You also understand how you need to have ideas of the sitting in order to become free of your ideas of the sitting. You understand how there wouldn't be any sitting if you didn't have ideas of the sitting. But if you attach to the ideas of the sitting, you don't reach the actual sitting. In this way you listen to the teacher about sitting. Then you go and sit. Then you ask the teacher questions about the sitting. Then you go sit. You go back and forth like that until one day you start to understand what sitting is. When you understand what sitting is, you are a Buddha.

When you can understand a little bit about what sitting is, you can make great strides in addition to your idea of sitting. I guess most of you have some idea of sitting. Almost no one is reclining or standing. It seems to me that you somehow got in to sitting postures. Superficially I see that you used the idea of sitting to arrive at the sitting. Sometimes you go to see the teacher with a bunch of other people. Sometimes two hundred people listen to the teacher talk about sitting. Sometimes you go in groups of fifteen or three. Sometimes you go all by yourself. Sometimes there is no teacher in the room with you but you are remembering what the teacher said and remembering what you read in the Scriptures which tell you about the nature of the sitting practice. But the correct understanding of sitting applies to every experience and phenomena. We just use the sitting as a traditional ceremony for the study of everything.

You could use anything to study. When you first meet a teacher you should just wholeheartedly sit and thus body and mind drop away. Actually even before you meet a teacher, body and mind thus drop away. Zen meditation is body and mind thus dropping away. I have a body and mind that thinks that you have a body and mind, or a bodymind complex. Zen meditation then is the way that your bodymind is dropping off. That is actually going on right now. Zen meditation is actually happening right now for each of us. It is the way your body and mind are actually working together and moving forward on the path of life. You do not have to make your body and mind drop away. It is dropping away. It is dropping away even without being born and dying. It is constantly liberating itself by its true nature. You do not have to make that happen. But in fact you do make it happen because that's the way you are. You are actually dropping away what you actually are. So what? That way that you are, is free. Seeing and understanding that way you are liberates you from other versions of the way you are which, if you believe them, you will not feel free.

We are gifted with the ability to see a bodymind that is not dropping away. Believing the image that the mind creates of a bodymind that is not dropping away and is not constantly liberating by its true nature, makes it hard for us to see and understand how we are actually constantly being liberated from being stuck. I don't recommend that you pretend to feel unstuck when you feel stuck. I think it is good when you feel stuck to say that you feel stuck. I suggest that your ability to say you feel stuck is because you're not. Everything that you do is sponsored by your freedom, including your inability to say that you feel stuck or lying that you feel free when you actually feel stuck.

Now I am playing the role of teacher and telling you about your body and mind. I am telling you that the sitting you are doing right now is actually Zen meditation and that the way of Zen meditation is the way that your body and mind are dropping off. Right now I am talking and some of you are listening to the teaching about body and mind and wholehearted sitting. Again, I say wholehearted sitting is body and mind dropping away. The price of admission to wholehearted sitting is to let go of the story that your body and mind are not dropping away, and also to let go of the story that your body and mind are dropping away. So when I tell you a story about your body and mind constantly sloughing itself off and expressing its freedom, that also deserves being released... and it will be. I am talking for the purpose of encouraging wholehearted sitting in each of us. To encourage the practice of wholehearted sitting is actually the way we already are. At the same time our wholehearted life graciously allows us to grasp our fantasies about ourselves as being who we are. Then it allows us to feel out of touch with our freedom. Our freedom is real. Our bondage is not. If bondage was real that would be that, and Buddhism should close down shop! But it is freedom that is real and freedom goes with happiness and great compassion for other beings who are not separate from the freedom, but who have not yet accepted it. The inability to accept the freedom goes with the inability to let go of our story about what is happening. Freedom is not necessarily not having any stories, but it is necessary to let go of them. Sometimes when you let go of them for a while you don't have any. It's not exactly that they had been destroyed, but you are just temporarily holding them, and you are looking at the fact of letting go of the story and not having to grab another one yet. So you are looking at no story.

When you are looking at no story you are looking at life without something that you can grasp which is like nothing you have ever seen so you don't know what to call it. So it is like nothing. But it's not nothing. It is just none of the things that you usually see. You were actually looking at life now

unpacked. But life unpacked looks like none of the packages. It looks like no eyes, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind, no colour, no sound, no taste, no objects of mind, no feelings, no emotions, no intentions, no ideas. It looks like that.

This is hard to get used to and that's why you have to go and talk to the teacher sometimes to see that you are okay. Before I came to Zen Centre I wasn't as advanced as what I have just talked about. But I was having experiences and I didn't know if they were advanced or if I needed help from a doctor. I didn't know if I should go on TV or go and see a psychiatrist. So I wanted to go and talk to a Zen teacher to see if what I was experiencing was okay and part of the course. We say that my body and mind lacks any essence, but my mind projects an image of an essence onto it. So I think it does and therefore I am in birth and death. Ultimately my body has no form and no characteristic that makes my body, my body. There is nothing about my body that makes my body, my body. My body is empty of a character by which it is a body. But I see it as if there were a character that makes the body. There is no such thing and yet I imagine it. My body does not produce itself. It is not independent. I project an image onto it that it is independent, but it is not independent. It depends on things other than itself to exist. My body ultimately cannot be found to exist. It has no essence. If you look for your body you can find some things but you will never find your body. You can look for your eyes but you won't find your eyes. Superficially you can find them. But in the final analysis if you look deeply you will not be able to find anything to exist.

Although you will not be able to find anything existing this does not mean that nothing exists. It just means that the way things are is that they are unfindable. Part of the difficulty about becoming free is that we have to see the difference between things not existing and not being able to find them existing. The way that they exist is that they cannot be found. Therefore they are in a state of freedom from the start and naturally beyond any way to suffer. But if we project an essence onto things, like in a packaging mode, then there can be suffering. In this wonderful universe suffering has been born by the mind. Mind apprehends the universe in such a way as to make suffering possible. The stars, as far as I know, are not suffering. The moon is not suffering. The wind is not suffering. They have no way to suffer because they have no way to project limiting ideas onto things that misconstrue their existence. We like to be able to find things! If we can't find things we can't talk about them. If we can't talk about them, we have to go to speech therapy. We are human beings and therefore we have to be able to talk about life. But in order to talk about life, and in order to talk about our sitting, we have to project a form onto it. We have to grab that form as though that were the sitting. Then we can talk about it and we can suffer.

In order to be a sitting Buddha we must grasp the form of sitting. You can't sit without grasping the characteristic of sitting and there is no characteristic of sitting. There is no characteristic by which sitting becomes sitting. But we can't sit without grasping the form, the mark, the characteristic of sitting. As we are sitting as Buddhas, or Buddha becoming people, we cannot avoid grasping the form of sitting. Although this doesn't make sitting actually sitting, we do have to do that. Simultaneously, we hear the teaching that this grasping at the form of sitting does not reach the liberating principle of what sitting is. Grasping the form of sitting, sitting can be really great. It can also be not so good. It can be wonderful, but it can't be really wonderful, in certain ways, unless you grasp it. Even then, it cannot reach the liberating principle of body and mind sitting. But you cannot reach the liberating principle of body and mind sitting in meditation unless you grasp the form of sitting which does not reach the principle of sitting. You can't

reach the principle without the grasping that doesn't reach the principle. If you are dealing with what I have said right now, that is the practice of dealing with wholehearted sitting. It is the practice of body and mind dropping away. There is no body and mind dropping away without grasping at body and mind that doesn't reach the principle by which body and mind drop away. We have to work with this dynamic. When you are already sitting you have not failed to grasp the mark of sitting. In that way that you are able to sit, stand, walk or swim in meditation it does not reach the principle that you need to reach in order to be free. Realising that at that time realises freedom. You let go of your conceptual activity. When you're finally wholeheartedly sitting and you think you have let go of that conceptual activity, and finally realise dropping of body and mind, you're doing the practice in which you realise that this has always been your life. There wasn't even a beginning to this and you see that this life wasn't even born.

Transcribed by Frances Collins 2/09 for UK Dancing Mountains Sangha Newsletter 'Mountain Silence'
Edit update 9/22