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# The Way of the Mystic

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When we started out this voyage together, I invited you to join me on the journey of a mystic, to set foot in a boat unfamiliar to you, a vessel whose dimensions none of you knew, and to let it drift out to sea without really knowing where you were going; to face the unknown with an open heart, without any apparent support, with no promise of anything. Just the way ahead, the way within, an internal voyager who leaves the pleasures of the world, and dives down deep into the recesses of his or her own heart-body-mind, alone.

As we embarked on that inner journey, we resolved to use right mindfulness as our compass, to bring careful attention, astute observation and clear seeing to the witness of the present moment; and to be ready to meet any hindrance or obstacle that should arise in our path with that awakened awareness and purity of presence. Such a practice asks of us a deep commitment, perseverance and “fanatical patience,” to constantly come back, time and time again to this moment.

We live in a society in which we’re used to being satisfied quickly, getting what we want, and being in control of things. But it just doesn’t work in this practice. We have to have the faith, the willingness to

surrender to the present moment, and in so doing, to be annihilated, to be burned, to go into the fire of the mind without wanting it not to hurt, and just to sit there. We enter into a spiritual holocaust.

I find that a very poignant expression because most of my relatives were killed during World War II. My father told me the story of how my grandfather was given the chance to save himself because he was a builder and his skills were needed. But, he chose to go with his family. He went to his death holding his little granddaughter in his arms. I consider that act of courageous surrender for the love of one's family incredibly heroic.

Recently I read the diaries of Ettie Hillesum, a brilliant young Dutch woman who died in Auschwitz. She was only 29. While sharing her very intimate moments of prayer and struggle through a life torn apart in monstrous ways, she traces the journey of the mystic that each one of us has undertaken, the way beyond all mental and physical affliction into the realm of the timeless, the Deathless:

*"I have looked our destruction, our miserable end, straight in the eye and accepted it into my life. And I continue to grow from day to day, even with death staring me in the face. For my life has become extended by death. . .*

*Living and dying, sorrow and joy, the blisters on my feet and the jasmine behind the house, the persecution, the unspeakable horrors — it is all as one in me, and I accept it all as one mighty whole."*

Ettie exhorts us not to waste energy on fear of death, or the refusal to acknowledge its inevitability, to accept death into our lives not through resignation or bitterness but by “bowing to the inevitable,” by looking death “straight in the eye. . . sustained by the certain knowledge that ultimately they cannot rob us of anything that matters.”

*“We must surrender all that is dearest to us in the enjoyment of the senses and go through a dark night in which we live without their help and comfort. Then when this is accomplished, we have to sacrifice even our thoughts and our choices, and undergo a still darker night – deprived of our familiar supports. This is a kind of death . . . and when all has been strained away, our emptiness will be filled with a new presence.”* (from ‘An Interrupted Life’ and ‘Letters from Westerbork’ by Ettie Hillesum, trans. by Arnold J. Pomerans)

In this burning of the ‘self’ or the ego, we too, are asked, with clear presence of mind, with courage and surrender, to give ourselves completely to the unknown. We know nothing about this unknown, this unpredictable moment except that meeting it with full awareness and acceptance is a wholesome thing to do. And as soon as we can step toward this moment, the only moment we have, with heroic surrender, we are tasting peace.

We are here to learn this same alchemy of the heart. We’re not asked to do anything unwise or harmful, we are not asked to commit suicide or to annihilate

ourselves, but just to learn to die to ourselves. It is not a physical death but it is a spiritual dying that brings us fully to life now — moment by courageous moment.

For in dying to the present moment, we let go of all expectation and hope, all fear and desire, all sense of self and personal history — this kind of death is a true self-emptying; and it is, in fact, our redemption.

Coming here was an act of courage, to contemplate death and make dedications to our parents, children, friends, who have died in tragic or distressing ways; or to those who live in pain with AIDS, cancer, Alzheimer's, paralysis, mental illness, or abuse. In the face of such affliction in our own lives or in the lives of our family members and friends, it is natural for us to feel devastating grief, bereavement, such a darkness in the heart that is anything but peaceful. So in the face of such devastating loss and pain, is it possible to know peace? Can we enter the fire of our suffering, and allow it to burn inside of us without being burned?

Ettie had endured physical and mental abuse of the worst kind. But she did not allow herself to indulge in hatred or resentment for her abusers, nor did she lose her dignity as a human being even when there was nothing in her world to hope for beyond her suffering. All she could do was take refuge in herself.

This way of responding to life and death resonate with the teachings of the Buddha. In the suttas, we read the Buddha's instructions to his disciples in times of calamity or distress, and the ways that they used the

Dhamma to transform their suffering, through insight knowledge and understanding.

We see an example of this in Venerable Ananda. He was an experienced bhikkhu who had long been devoted to the Triple Gem, serving as the Buddha's personal attendant and frequently called upon to give discourses on the teachings. But after the Venerable Sariputta passed away, Ananda lamented his death so deeply that he felt "almost as if he had fallen into an abyss." And while he was in this state, he could not even find the strength in Dhamma to bear his overwhelming feeling of loss. It was only when the Blessed One consoled him and asked him if Sariputta's death could take away Ananda's virtue, wisdom, liberation or knowledge of liberation that Ananda's grief was assuaged.

Like Ananda, we must realise that our own suffering, the loss of our loved ones, even facing our own extinction, does not diminish the noble qualities in us. We must bring forth the reflection on the inevitability of death, "All that is mine beloved and pleasing will become otherwise, will become separated from me," (*Dasadhamma Sutta, Ang. 10*), and seek refuge in ourselves, in no one else, to be our own "island and refuge." (*Samyutta Nikaya 47:13*)

In the story of Kisagotami, this teaching is beautifully brought to life. She had married into a wealthy family, in spite of her poverty and unattractive appearance and finally won the acceptance of her in-laws when she bore a little son. Suddenly, the child died. Nothing

could be more tragic for Kisagotami. She refused to accept that her little son was dead. In her desperation, she came to see the Buddha, cradling the infant in her arms, believing that the Blessed One could revive him.

The Buddha asked her to procure a small quantity of mustard seeds from a house where no one had ever died. When she could find no household that had been spared death's unremitting hand, the insight into the impermanence of all conditioned phenomena arose in her mind. And so, Kisagotami was able to go beyond "the death of sons," beyond sorrow. (*S.N. 5*)

One of the most heart-rending accounts of how personal tragedy can lead to insight into *anicca* and spiritual awakening concerns the beautiful young Patacara, who also lived at the time of the Buddha. Born to a wealthy merchant family of Savatthi, she eloped at a young age with her lover to avoid a marriage arranged by her over-protective parents. Fearing the wrath of Patacara's father, the young couple settled in a remote area.

On two different occasions Patacara became pregnant, and both times, in spite of her husband's unwillingness to accompany her, the head-strong young woman secretly set off on her own for Savatthi, hoping that the birth of her child would soften her parents' hearts and bring about a reconciliation. Each time, her husband pursued and found her. On the first occasion, the child's birth en route precipitated their return before reaching Savatthi.

But the second journey led to a series of calamitous events. First, Patacara had to endure the hardship of bearing her child in a raging storm without shelter or support. The next morning she discovered her husband's body; he had died from snakebite while looking for materials to protect them from the storm. Then, as she struggled on alone in the direction of Savatthi, her newborn was snatched up in the talons of a hawk and carried away, and within moments, her firstborn son accidentally drowned in the swollen currents of a river they were trying to cross. And finally, when she reached Savatthi, exhausted and stricken with grief, Patacara learned that her parents and brother had just perished in a fire that destroyed the family home.

By the time Patacara appeared before the Blessed One, she was nearly mad with grief and despair. Recognising her readiness to hear the Dhamma, and out of compassion for her, the Buddha taught her about the dangers of samsara:

*“Do not be troubled any more. You have come to one who is able to be your shelter and refuge. It is not only today that you have met with calamity and disaster, but throughout this beginningless round of existence, weeping over the loss of sons and others dear to you, you have shed more tears than the waters of the four oceans.”*

*“The four oceans contain but a little water  
Compared to all the tears we have shed,*



*Smitten by sorrow, bewildered by pain.*

*Why, O woman are you still heedless?"-  
Dhammapada Commentary 2:268; Buddhist Legends, 2:255  
(quoted in Great Disciples of the Buddha, edited by Bhikkhu  
Bodhi).*

She soon realised with penetrating insight the nature of all conditioned things, that they arise, they cease, and in their cessation there is peace.

After her acceptance into the *bhikkhuni* order, we learn of Patacara's deepening realisations through her poetry. She vividly compares the streams of water flowing down a slope to the different life-spans of human beings. Some streams drain into the sand very soon on the descent, others more slowly, while some reach the bottom of the slope and then sink into the earth. And so with beings of this realm, some live only a few years, some to mid-life, and others even to old age, but each one eventually succumbs to death. (*Therigatha* 112-116)

The final moment of her awakening is portrayed in a memorable poem:

*"Then I took a lamp  
and went into my cell,  
checked the bed,  
and sat down on it.  
I took a needle  
and pushed the wick down.*

*When the lamp went out,  
my mind was freed."*

From this seeing into the true essence of all conditioned phenomena, we realise three universal qualities: in the arising of all conditions, we see *anicca*, impermanence, that which is death-bound or has the sign of death, and which ultimately points us toward the signless or Deathless. These temporal conditions also dissolve and pass away; thus we know the *dukkha* of being propelled by desire, the unsatisfactoriness of the conditioned realm, and we are brought to the knowledge of the timeless, the desireless. Finally, in the cessation of these transient conditions there is peace, emptiness, no self to be found, *anatta*.

We are also urged to contemplate our *kamma* and the relentless wheel of *samsara*. At one time the Blessed One asks a man lamenting his father's death: "For which father are you grieving, the father of this life, or the last life, or the life before that. For if one wanted to grieve, then it would be just as well to grieve for the other fathers too." (*Jataka* 352)

As you contemplate these teachings, ask yourselves: Who is it that dies? Who is abused? Who grieves? What are we identified with — the body, feelings, perceptions, mental fabrications, thoughts, and memories? Where is our true refuge? Can shelter be found in that which is impermanent?

As soon as we identify with and attach to desire, to the conditioned, then we are seeking safety, refuge in things that die, not in the Deathless.

There are two kinds of death for the living, one

that leads to death and one that leads to peace, to enlightenment. When we carry around a lot of wreckage in the mind, we are not putting down the burden. We are identifying with and caught in self-view, 'I am an abused person' or 'a grief-stricken person', or 'Five of my friends have died from AIDS and I just can't face life.' That's a death that leads to death.

But if we can meet the present moment with mindfulness and wise reflection, we can begin to put down that burden, surrender it, and allow ourselves to receive the next moment with purity of mind, letting the conditions that arise and our attachment to them die. That kind of death leads to enlightenment.

If we are not aware, we are as if dead, and we live in fear of death. As Socrates said, "Those who love wisdom practise dying all the time and death to them is the least terrible thing in the world." The fearless mind is the mind of the mystic voyager, the mind that sees life the way it really is, holding each moment in its gaze, witnessing this arising and ceasing of tempest, of agony, of fear, of the darkest night and turning each one to the light to be redefined and revealed to us, and then to end, to cease.

This practice is not to condone our suffering, but to question our assumptions, to allow moral indignation when there are wrongs, to accept our humanity. So we feel the pain of illness, the burden of stigma, the loss of the loved, the fear of death, and yet, we fully

receive life with merciful awareness. No matter how much suffering life brings us, we can always return to that still point of knowing, to a serene abiding in the centre of life's storms, a safe harbour.

And like Patacara, Kisagotami or Ettie, in dying to our pain, to our grief, to our hatred, to our fear — letting them go at their own rhythm, not forcibly, not trying to control or get rid of them, we begin to see them as natural conditions arising due to causes. We know their nature, their origin, their ending, and the way to their dissolution. Rather than something dark and to be feared, death becomes a resurrection, an inner illumination, like “the sun awakening the lotus.”

By coming here, you may have expected that you would figure out how to get rid of the terrible grief or fear that you're feeling, or how to overcome death. Actually, it's not about getting rid of anything. We enter the eternal just by dropping our illusions and our assumptions, offering ourselves to the moment, and standing at the brink of the world with the courage not to cling to anything or anyone.

What would it be like if we never got old? What if we never got sick, or if we never died? Could we really love each other if we were here forever? Through our own mortality we learn to love, through our darkest suffering, we are taken beyond suffering, and being exposed to our own extinction, we can realise that within us which is indestructible.

Trusting each moment, even in the midst of the most terrifying conditions, we awaken in ourselves the possibility to live with complete trust. We grow more vulnerable and, at the same time, more fearless, not taking refuge in sorrow. We learn how to live, and how to die, and how to embrace our joy and our pain.

We heard of the atrocities happening in Kosovo, with so many innocent people being mutilated and put to death. It seems to go on in every generation, every century. Purity and wholesomeness are so needed in this world. Be earth, air, fire, water, the elements. Be that mystic traveller diving for the pearls of wisdom in your heart. Then your actions can spring from an awakened awareness, each moment of pure seeing conditioning the next.

This purity of view is able to contemplate defilement in the mind, to know sorrow as that which takes us to suffering; to understand that which is noble in the mind and, to be totally committed to it.

This then is our pilgrimage, not just during the retreat, but even when you leave this sanctuary and go back to your daily lives, sustain that ardour and that total commitment to free yourselves, and to bless the world. As Ettie wrote:

*“You must be able to bear your sorrow, even if it seems to crush you. You will be able to stand up again, for human beings are so strong, and your sorrow must become an integral part of yourself. You mustn’t run*

*away from it. Do not relieve your feeling through hatred. Give your sorrow all the space and shelter in yourself that is its due, for if everyone bears grief honestly and courageously, the sorrow that now fills the world will abate.”*