

The Great Death

*Die while alive, and be completely dead to yourself
Then do as you will, all is good.
– Zen waka poem*

The great theme of Holy Week is death and resurrection – the movement through death into new life. For many, a more familiar perspective is that life ends in death, all forms of life wear out, and that's it, the end of the road.

Death as the end of the road finds its expression in popular culture. Woody Allen said, "I'm not afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens." Children see it like this too. Art Linkletter asked a group of children on his show, "What's the saddest thing that ever happened?" A boy answered, "When my doggie died." Offering comfort, Linkletter told the boy his dog was surely with God in heaven now. The little guy scrunched his face, "What would God want with a dead dog?"

Concerning *new life*, I recently heard an anecdote: This forlorn fellow calls a radio talk show to complain the life insurance company had canceled his policy. "How come?" asks the radio host. "They can't insure me until I get a life," says the caller.

In Zen there's an expression – the "great death" – that points to a parallel with the Christian belief in death and resurrection. Zen masters speak of the great death and, from compassion born of this death, they wield the sword that cuts off delusion and gives new life. But our initial, conditioned response to this expression might be "what could be so *great* about death?"

Every day in sesshin, we hear the traditional encouragement to Zen students: Life and death are of supreme importance; time passes swiftly by, and opportunity is lost; we must strive to awaken; do not waste your time by night or day. This encouragement urges us on into the great matter, to settle it once and for all, the matter of our life and death.

On this Good Friday, let's look into the great matter and the great death we hear tell of. First let's look to a poet's expression of it, then to the conversion of a well-known saint in the Christian tradition. Finally, we'll consider the experience of a colorful Zen ancestor.

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The great Irish poet W. B. Yeats said that “poetry and religion are the same thing.” To see how this may be, let’s look into the poetry of Emily Dickinson (1830-86).

Dickinson’s poetry is direct and simple with respect to the themes of life and death. She is known for her “needle touch” in piercing the movements of mind and heart to the core of her experience. She has been called a “poet of the *transitus*,” what medieval theologians called the “crossover,” passage of the soul, the transition.

One of Dickinson’s poems goes like this:

*A death-blow is a life-blow to some
Who, till they died, did not alive become.*

Her images often evoke the “no-thing” of Zen experience:

I’ll tell thee all how blank it grew; or

*...Heaven is a different thing
Conjectured, and waked sudden in,
And might o’erwhelm me so!*

Dickinson’s poem *I heard a fly buzz when I died* shows how an event in the phenomenal world can trigger experience perhaps akin to Zen insight:

*I heard a fly buzz when I died;
The stillness round my form
Was like the stillness in the air
Between the heavens of storm.*

*The eyes beside had wrung them dry,
And breaths were gathering sure
For that last onset, when the King
Be witnessed in his power.*

*I willed my keepsakes, signed away
What portion of me
Be assignable – and then
There interposed a fly,*

With blue, uncertain, stumbling buzz,

*Between the light and me
And then the windows failed, and then
I could not see to see.*

Lapses in perception and consciousness appear elsewhere in Dickinson's poetry. For instance (in abbreviated form):

*I felt a funeral in my brain...
And then a plank in reason broke,
And I dropped down...
And finished knowing then.*

Let's take a closer look at *I heard a fly buzz when I died*:

It wasn't *before* she died that she heard the fly buzz. She heard it *when* she died, she heard it and died at the same time.

*The stillness round my form
Was like the stillness in the air.*

She was still and quiet at the time of this experience.

*For that last onset, when the King
Be witnessed in his power.*

Stillness before witnessing the King in his power. *That last onset* conveys a sense of overcoming and bringing on the witnessing. This would be consistent with the poem shown above: – *Heaven is a different thing... [that if] waked sudden in, might o'erwhelm me so!*

*I willed my keepsakes, signed away
What portion of me
Be assignable.*

She had gotten rid of as much as she could.

And then there interposed a fly,

*With blue, uncertain, stumbling buzz
Between the light and me*

*And then the windows failed, and then
I could not see to see.*

What an interesting way to describe insight experience – *I could not see to see.*
Insight into what? Maybe into the King in his power.

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Emily Dickinson's experience of "could not see to see" sounds like the experience of Saul of Tarsus (ca. 10-67) on the road to Damascus. As translated in the Bible from the original Latin text: "Paul rose from the ground and with open eyes saw nothing."

This incident is recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 9. Saul of Tarsus, still breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord, asked the high priest for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, that if he found any men or women belonging to the Way – the Way was a name used by the early Christian community for itself – he could bring them back to Jerusalem in chains.

On his journey, as Saul was nearing Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"

"Who are you?" asked Saul. The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city and you will learn what you must do."

Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes, he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand and brought him to Damascus. For three days he was unable to see, and he did not eat, but was moved to intense prayer.

This experience led to Saul's conversion and transformation into Paul, the apostle of early, spreading Christianity. The old Saul had died out, fallen away and arisen as Paul the spiritual guide. He could then say "It is not I now but Christ who lives in me."

By all accounts, it was a great death. Witnessed by his entourage on the road to Damascus, this climactic event was accorded such significance by St. Luke that he wrote of it three times in the Acts of the Apostles.

The great Rhineland mystic Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) devoted a sermon to Paul's experience. In his 19th sermon, he said:

“I think the experience has a four-fold sense. One is that when Paul rose up from the ground with open eyes he saw Nothing, and the Nothing was God; for when he saw God he calls that Nothing. In a second sense: When he got up he saw nothing but God. Third: In all things he saw nothing but God. And in a fourth sense: When he saw God, he saw all things as nothing.”

Meister Eckhart continues: “If we are to know God it must be without means, and then nothing alien can enter in. If we see God in this light, it must be without the intrusion of anything created. *Then we have an immediate knowledge of eternal life.*”

“For God to be perceived by the soul, it must be blind. We must take God as mode without mode, and essence without essence, for he has no modes. Therefore St. Bernard says, ‘He who would know thee God, must measure thee without measure.’”

Meister Eckhart concludes his sermon with “Let us pray to our Lord that we may come to that understanding of Him that is wholly without mode and without measure.” What a wonderful prayer for Zen students!

Paul rose up and with open eyes saw nothing. A lot of struggle preceded that experience in his life, a lot of doubt, strong feeling, and aversion to the early Christians, whose example showed him a way different than his own. In this, Paul's experience reminds me of a Zen ancestor's.

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Tokusan Sengan (782-865) lived in northwestern China. He went through a searching and training process at a time when the methods and disciplines of Zen were not yet established. A highly educated man, he carried on academic studies of Buddhism, winning public recognition for his scholarship and becoming known as *Shu Kongo O*, King of the Diamond Sutra.

As a Buddhist scholar, Tokusan had learned that an incalculable period of time was necessary for ordinary people to become enlightened. One day he heard that the Zen Buddhists were becoming influential in the south, speaking of “transmission outside the scriptures, and not relying on letters.” When he heard they taught that enlightenment could happen here and now through self-realization – independently

of sutra knowledge – he thought it was utter nonsense. Such heresy could *not* be approved by scholars.

So Tokusan went on a mission to the south, declaring “I will find and overthrow the den of Zen devils.” It is recorded that when he left home, his mind was so full of resentment that he couldn’t open his mouth. Tokusan sounds like Saul of Tarsus traveling to Damascus, eight centuries earlier, to take the Christians back to Jerusalem in chains. By light of their later experience, such strong resentments in our heroes may have masked patterns of doubt and spiritual quest growing unnoticed.

Spiritual quest led scholar Tokusan up a mountain road where he met a Tea Lady, who cleverly convinced him to meet and study with Master Ryutan. Tokusan began training with Ryutan, arguing his points by day and night. It is not recorded how long he studied with the Master, or what sort of inner search he went through. As a sutra expert, his spiritual quest must have driven him hard.

There’s a saying that “man’s extremity is God’s opportunity.” Tokusan likely went to his extremity, feeling the “great doubt” spoken of in Zen training. One imagines that his scholarly bent had given him a wedge of “great motivation” against the doubt. Saul of Tarsus may have been in similar extremity on the road to Damascus.

One night Tokusan took leave of his teacher but came back, saying “It’s pitch black out there.” Ryutan lit a candle for him, and just as Tokusan reached through the door for it, Ryutan blew it out. At this Tokusan was awakened and saw for himself. Ryutan was actually blowing away the darkness for him. Tokusan made a deep bow to his teacher. When Ryutan asked, “What have you realized?” Tokusan said, “From now on I will not doubt the words of an old master renowned everywhere under the sun.”

The next day, Tokusan brought all his sutra manuscripts before the meditation hall, lit a torch and burned them. He declared that, compared to one’s true experience, all abstruse doctrine and learning are like a hair in vast space, or like throwing a drop of water into a big ravine.

By all accounts, it was a great death. Tokusan was no longer the sutra scholar he had been up to then. He revived as Zen Man Tokusan, the great self of no self. Reviving in Zen means this inner awakening experience.

Tokusan went on to practice hard and become abbot of a large monastery. His method was singular. He negated everything presented to him, using the method

now referred to as “taking life.” Rejecting everything the student came up with, as if to say *Not this! Not this!*, he pushed the student ever back into looking inward, digging deeper. In this way, he brought many disciples to Zen insight experience.

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Tokusan Sengan, Saul of Tarsus, and Emily Dickinson – our heroes in great death – they could not see to see, the sight went clean out of their eyes! Great death *and transformation* is an apt description of what Tokusan and St. Paul experienced, perhaps less so with Emily Dickinson, we can’t be sure. My sense from her poetic wonder, though, is that dying to herself was overwhelming when she heard that fly buzz.

To die once the great death is self-realization. It is not a willful self-determination. We don’t just decide to dispense with our ego-consciousness (the I-me-mine syndrome) and with our blocks and hang-ups, for they arise from long conditioning.

Rather, in forgetting ourselves, we see through the impediments, they fall away by the power of the insight and understanding. Another Zen expression for this is the *great cessation* – great cessation as the freedom and peace of mind that comes from realizing, as Thomas Merton said, “there is nothing we lack,” there is nothing to seek outside ourselves.

So it is that *great death* is really a Zen term of art for enlightenment experience – insight into the nature of reality and the world, including ourselves. What’s more, it shows us how to proceed: In forgetting the self, one perceives the path to embodying the Way and perfecting one’s character. It is a life-long undertaking. Coming to see and know like this has generated, through the ages, a gratitude in seekers well beyond the measure of what is customary among humankind.

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