

Entering the Waves of Life and Death

By Joen Snyder O'Neal

Fall, 2001

When I was a child my family would go every summer to Fenwick Island, a beach resort off the coast of Delaware. There my brother and I would happily play for days in the golden sand and the shining waves. When I was very young my father taught me the proper way to meet the waves. "Put your body in this shape and your arms like this," he said, showing me how to put my hands together and make a little bow facing the waves, so I wouldn't be knocked down and could enter the waves smoothly. "Don't flinch — just dive right in," he called after me, as a really huge wave appeared.

Many years later Dainin Katagiri Roshi gave me instructions for sitting meditation and for meeting the waves of my life. Make a stable base; be upright, open, and balanced; don't lean; don't move; don't meddle with your thoughts; just be present with things as they are.

Recently I spent time with a student of mine, Mary Feidt. After a long struggle with cancer she was on her deathbed, knocked around by pain, fear, and anxiety. I saw Mary's suffering and that of her family, and I realized how extremely difficult it is to let go of the physical body and all that we cherish. At that time I felt deeply how the instructions for sitting and for living are also instructions for dying—for how to meet the suffering of our physical death as well as the moment-to-moment dying we experience in our lives of constant change. "Don't lean" means not to cling to our preferences; "don't move" means to stay with what's happening, even if it's very very hard. If we try to stop the wave, we will suffer. If we meet the wave in the right posture of body and mind, our suffering will be alleviated.

Tenshin Reb Anderson, senior dharma teacher at the San Francisco Zen Center, was in a serious bike accident recently. His hip was broken, and he was in intense pain. As he lay in the ambulance on the long bumpy ride to the hospital he practiced relinquishment, again and again — letting go of the continually-arising thoughts of the way it could be or should be. And as he lay in his hospital bed he had to allow the healthy Reb of the past to die and open completely into what was happening in the present. In the language of zen, he had to meet what was happening with no mind.

The wave is not separate from the ocean, and we, the wave, and the ocean, are all part of the great ocean of being, arising and falling in each moment, never separate. One night as Mary and I were talking we thought of all the people in the world who were struggling with their dying at that very moment: the woman in a hut in the forest, the man in a tent in the desert, the child in a refugee camp, the woman in a nursing home — all engaged in the same relinquishment. There was an ease that came from recognizing that she was not alone—that she was accompanied by innumerable other beings in this completely universal activity.

Katagiri Roshi emphasized again and again the Buddhist teaching that we are constantly in the realm of oneness. We struggle to go from ignorance to awakening, from samsara to nirvana, but essentially we are already in the vast realm of universal experience. We don't go from life to death — we just plunge into the next wave, the wave that is inextricably part of the great ocean, the Whole Body of reality. This is the fundamental liberating teaching. One of the last things I said to Mary was to remind her of the generosity she had so wonderfully demonstrated throughout her life, and suggest that she continue that practice now — offering herself to the vast, inconceivable ocean of being, facing the next wave with a bow, diving right in.

Mary Feidt died peacefully on October 23, 2001.