

To *There* and Back

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YOU MAY all have heard of the Daruma doll which, though struck down seven times, always comes back for the eighth. I am not sure I would even come near Daruma's ability or record, but I feel that I went down for the count of two but came back up.

I believe, from all indications, that I had a "near death experience." I did not have "out of body experience" and I don't know for sure how near was near, but again, from what I can understand, it was pretty close, attended by a heart arrest situation. I am sure that many people with heart problems or other difficulties share my experience.

I would write about it, not because it is unique or profound in itself, but because I believe I learned a great deal about the power of Onembutsu and the real meaning of Other Power. In essence, the events afforded me a religious experience which I have never had so clearly. I would like to try to give some perspective on it, as it now recedes into my memory and the more normal cares and interests again engulf my mind.

You must all know that I am not a mystic or a pietist, but an intellectual in my approach to things. Deep personal experiences, if any, do not easily find expression in me. Some of this comes from my "praise the Lord" experience of former years. I tend to be critical of sentimental and emotional religion, because it is easy to manipulate people's feelings and anxieties. Nevertheless, I have never rejected that dimension and have inwardly been envious of those who could so easily speak of their deeper experiences and intuitions.

I still may not be able to do justice to what I have experienced. I am what I am, but I would like to try to convey something of the meaning to me of what I have passed through.

Perhaps first a little background. Last year I developed an angina problem which seemed to be greatly improved by the time I left for Japan on May 31, 1983. The doctor seemed to think all would be well with my medicines. Though

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the original problem was mild, it was a signal, and I had to come to terms to a degree with my fragile life.

I got to Japan with little difficulty but after two or three days at the Honganji Kokusai Center, I began to have angina pain again. They were of varying degrees and intermittent. I tried taking my nitroglycerine and resting but when they would subside and I felt good, I would become active again.

Ruth Tabrah came back from her trip to Kanto with Rev. Yukiko Motoyoshi. She was very supportive and encouraged rest and careful eating. Everyone was concerned. She was to give a lecture on writing her novel about Shinran at the University. That day, after a period of rest, I felt so good that I thought the problem might be resolved. I went to the lecture and was far more active than I should have been. The next day the symptoms were back. I took nitro and rested all day.

Toward evening I suggested we take a short leisurely walk. After one block I realized I could not make it back to my room. I sat in front of the Center while they called the ambulance. Within a few moments I was in the Intensive Care Unit of the Takeda Hospital near Kyoto Station.

I spent a quiet first night and day, while they monitored my situation. Early in the evening, there developed a slight angina pain which evolved into a Kafkaesque experience such as I never experienced. When it became more intense and threatening, all hell seemed to break loose as the doctor and nurses used every emergency procedure. At one point I had heart arrest and was pounded on the chest. Needles for I.V. seemed to go in everywhere. The doctor applied medicine after medicine and the nurses scurried for various forms of equipment. I was completely wired up with every conceivable monitor and medicine. I seemed to be alert through the period and realized they had valiantly seen me through. The pain and problem eased for the time being.

The next day passed quietly. Ruth came to see me and infused me with her joyous optimism which I had some reason to doubt under the circumstances. But she lifted my spirits.

Came the evening once again and a slight touch of angina pain. I am not sure all the reasons, but some were at least psychological, and before I knew it another attack was on the way. This time the experience was even more Kafkaesque and I thought it was surely the end. It was a myocardial infarction.

I was wheeled quickly to an operating room for angiography. I will not go into all the gory details of that experience. Once I was in position, there was nothing to do but give myself to the experience. Almost involuntarily I closed my eyes and recited constantly *Namu Amida Butsu*. I felt little pain, though they were putting things in that they thought painful, as they kept apologizing.

I could see faces, and hear voices but gradually they became dim. I was descending as though through clouds. The feeling of peace and euphoria was

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amazing to me. I realized I might be dying, and I began to shout out my last words of love and sayonara to all that I could think, interspersed with the Nembutsu.

As I descended, I realized: I am alone. It is true, One is born alone—One dies alone. There was a lightness about it all. At the bottom of the descent, all I could see was a brightness and I heard only a bell and a buzzing sound. There I was. I felt immensely free; that the choice to die, perhaps by entering the light, or to live and struggle to return were my choices.

Recalling all the stories I have heard of seeing friends or relatives at this point, or the idea of hosts of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, I shouted out (I thought), "There is nobody here!" But then I thought again, maybe they remain hidden to give us a choice.

I decided in that moment that there was more I would like to do, I did not feel my life completed, though many might think I had done something.

With that decision, I recited Onembutsu. Each time I repeated it, it seemed new strength came into me. During this time I could hear the doctors as they watched the graph. Apparently my blood pressure or heart condition seemed to be sinking, and it looked like it might fade out. Then suddenly, it began to rise and they all became interested in watching the numbers rise. It seemed as if they were surprised.

However, in my delirium, I heard someone shout, "*Shindeyo. . .*" which I took to mean: "Die!" Then: "*Owari desu*" which I thought meant, "It's the end" (of me). Finally someone said in English: "We've done all we could." I thought, I am supposed to die but I didn't, I shall probably linger.

Back in my ward, I felt isolated and like they were waiting for me to die. I felt miserable because I must not move and disturb the angiography incision—the bed was so hard.

The next day, President Futaba Kenkō, among others, briefly visited. I could not speak a word because of injury to my tongue. When he left, I *thought* he said: "*Yukkuriōjō shite kudasai. Isha-san mo sō kangaete imasu.*" My knowledge of Japanese being so limited and at that time unclear, I thought he said, "Die leisurely, the doctors agree. . . ." I felt even more isolated.

The question became should I try to live until Dotty got there, or let go now. My mind and body were so agitated because of the bed and my general feeling, I decided I should go now. It will be easier for all. In order to assist things, I asked for sleeping medicine which they gave me.

While I was asleep, I dreamed I died. I heard someone say: Bloom is dead. There were preparations for a *kyōdansō* (funeral service) at the Betsuin. I hoped a picture taken at a wedding by a friend would be used. In this experience there was blackness and no sinking feeling, though I perceived dream images.

Suddenly I found myself awake in the ward, looking at the light above. It

was not the Pure Land, but right here and now! I felt much better. I had gotten some rest and was more relaxed though my back was *killing* me. Eventually they treated the situation and put a zabuton under me which was a relief. From that time, everything began to improve and I tried to reflect on the experience. I should make some observations.

1) It is clear my perceptions and the doctors or others were quite different. I misinterpreted everything. They were telling me the procedure was finished and they had been successful in opening the artery. I totally misunderstood President Futaba. What I heard as *ōjō*—to take rebirth—was *yōjō*—recover, or take care. Rather than waiting for me to die, they had restored my life.

2) The power I experienced through the Nembutsu was real to my feeling and perception. I would accept that might have been introduced by the medicines and the operation, yet as my experience, it seemed an important and even surprising element to the watching doctors. There are material as well as spiritual dimensions in healing. For me it came through Onembutsu.

3) The experience of Other Power was deeply moving and striking to me. I have vicariously employed other peoples experiences in developing my thought. However, in this event Other Power became utterly clear. I could only give myself over to the experience. The more I yielded to the procedures and rested on the doctors, the less pain and anxiety I felt in the whole experience. Other Power seemed to me to be that absolute yielding—the recognition that *I* can do absolutely nothing—a letting go of the ego and its pretensions. It was total *Omakase*, absolute yielding to the Other Power. In reaching the end of self is the beginning of faith and the embrace that never abandons.

4) I also recognized in the situation the Thusness-Suchness of things. This is the way it is. The compassion which I sensed flowing through the doctors and the nurses just as it was, was alright. To live or die was simply to rest in the awareness of the eternal life that is Amida. The Nembutsu I recited throughout was not a request. I did not think of asking to be rescued. Rather it was for me a recognition that it is alright and a reflection that in my life I had already received limitless compassion and blessing. I could accept the situation as it was.

5) On awaking from my dream-sleep, I felt it was a new day. Each day or even moment does not belong simply to me. I have been given life anew. Rennyō's letter on white ashes has become extremely meaningful to me as each day I open my eyes and I am still alive, though precariously yet.

6) I am not a saint but a passion-ridden mortal. What Shinran pointed to is for me truer than it has ever been. As I progress in recovery, I find my ego interests returning. The cares and desires that motivate me all return. I am just as egoistic as I ever was. Shinran did not base the assurance of our ultimate enlightenment on supernormal or unusual efforts or experiences. He knew how unsteady and contradictory he was—and all beings are. *Tannishō*, Chapter Nine,

is especially relevant here.

As I see it, the Shinshū experience is that confidence that despite my egoism which resists at every turn, I am still embraced. *Bonno danzezu shite toku Nehan.*

Such experiences as I or others might describe must be regarded for what they are—they are only guideposts that we know we are on the right track and that we can mutually encourage each other. They do not mean someone is now transformed to some higher saintly status. Most of us will never have deeply moving experiences to witness to. That does not make us or our faith, which is not generated by us, any less. There are not to be any elite saints in Shinshū. We are *dōbō dōgyō*—fellow companions on the way, and passion-ridden mortals grasping for life.

7) The compassion of Amida is not simply some abstract belief. It is real, and it flows through the ministrations of the doctors and the nurses in an overflowing abundance. I cannot express my feeling adequately as I observed their limitless efforts working in a group. It is just amazing.

Then the outpouring of support, spiritual and material, from countless friends has just been overwhelming. When I tried to express it in words, some images came to mind. The most vivid was:

A flickering candlelight,
Blown by a spring wind,
Held in a cupped hand.

Then:

Engulfed in waves of Compassion,
Through flooded eyes
Namu Amida Butsu.

As Shinran said, when all our thoughts and actions have been performed, the final compassion is *Namu Amida Butsu*. Nothing lies beyond its all-embracing depth.

What will be the outcome of all this? I cannot tell. All I can say is that I look at Shinran and Nembutsu with new eyes and experience. The causes and conditions that make up our lives are vast and inscrutable. What seems to be unfortunate turns out to be the most fortunate. I came to Japan ostensibly to lecture and teach others, as well as to take *tokudō* (ordination). I have been taught, and though my *tokudō* will not be recognized by authorities, I believe I received the true *tokudō*.

I went *there* and came back. All the way I was accompanied by *Namu Amida Butsu*. I feel confident that wherever I go from here, back there or forward into the future, it will always be *Namu Amida Butsu* that points the way.

Namu Amida Butsu