
Every Day is a Fine Day

A Zen Take on Problems

Mike K. Sayama

Keywords

Zen · Attachment · Behavioral health · Desire

“Every day is a fine day.” Omori Sogen, a leading Zen master, *Kendo* (fencing) teacher, and calligrapher of modern Japan, used this saying to describe how someone, matured through long and hard training in Zen, experiences life. After Japan’s defeat in World War II, Omori *Roshi* (title for Zen Master, literally old teacher) and his family, like many others, were impoverished and had little to eat. In his words, “We were sometimes so poor that even if we looked all over the house, we could not find one penny. That is how poor a life I caused my wife to have. At the longest we went five days to one week without food, but we did not starve. If we drank only water, we could live” (Hosokawa 1999, 61–62). His three-year-old daughter got sick with tuberculin meningitis and might have been cured with penicillin, but the cost was beyond reach. Omori *Roshi* recounted, “In the end, the only thing that we could do was to watch our own child suffer and die before our eyes. After that child died, my wife cried by herself every night for three years.

For a parent, there is no sadder thing than to have your own child die before you” (Hosokawa 1999, 67). In the face of such sadness, what could Omori *Roshi* mean that every day is a fine day? What could he mean in the face of the tragedy and terror so routinely seen on the evening news, which at the time of this writing were the Syrian refugees and the massacre in Paris?

“Every day is a fine day” is not a Pollyannaish perspective that denies all this suffering. “Existence is suffering” is often portrayed as Buddha’s First Noble Truth. “Every day is a fine day” must mean that the human spirit can transcend existence as suffering. To Omori *Roshi*, a person who has realized the True Self through long and hard training in Zen will be able to express the brightness of the original nature even in the midst of suffering. For such a person, every day is a fine day.

Fudoshin: The Immovable Mind

If you took “Everyday is a fine day” as a *koan* (a problem impenetrable to rational solution, such as “What is the sound of one hand clapping? Or what is the meaning of life?”), you could ask yourself every night, “Was today a fine day?” To answer, you might consider wasted moments,

M.K. Sayama (✉)
Chozen-ji, International Zen Dojo, Honolulu,
HI, USA
e-mail: msayama@communityfirst.co

moments of pride and regret, moments of joy and sadness, moments of anxiety and ease, moments of loss and gain, and so on and on. From the Zen perspective, if it was not a fine day, your mind must have stopped; your flow of consciousness must have gotten stuck on an attachment; and your thoughts became delusions that caused you to suffer. During the day, you must have abided in what Takuan Soho (1573–1645) called “the dwelling place of ignorance and its affective disturbance.” To experience everyday as a fine day is to experience the mind that does not move because it does not stop moment by moment with whatever it encounters, not even pain. More to the point, if today is not a fine day, at this very moment your mind is stopped.

Takuan was teacher to the Shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu, the ruler of Japan from 1623 to 1651, and to the great swordsman Yagyū Tajima Munenori (1568–1646). He wrote letters to Yagyū instructing him on the Immovable Mind in the context of sword fighting. These letters were compiled into a collection called *Fudochi Shimmyo-roku* (The Records of the Wondrous Mind of Immovable Wisdom), which is studied as a fundamental text at Chozen-ji, a Rinzai Zen temple founded by Omori *Roshi* and his student Tanouye Tenshin (1938–2003) in Hawaii. Tanouye *Roshi* was a genius in the martial way, expert in arts such as *Kendo*, *Judo*, *Karate*, *Iaido* (the art of drawing the sword), and *Jojitsu* (the art of the staff). Tanouye *Roshi* was also an advisor to many of the political, business, and community leaders in Hawaii. The interpretation of Zen in this chapter is based mainly on his teachings.

If we take sword fighting as a metaphor for living, Takuan’s instructions on the Immovable Mind tell us to encounter the problems in our lives without stopping to make every day a fine day. The central teaching follows:

Not to move means not to stop with an object that is encountered. Not to move means not to stop with an object that is seen. Because if the mind stops on any object, the mind will be disturbed with thoughts and emotions. This will lead to movement in the heart and mind. The stopping inevitably leads to the moving that is disturbance; therefore, there will be no freedom of movement.

For example, suppose ten men are opposing you, each in succession ready to strike you down with a sword. *Ukenagasu* (deflect, parry, but literally, receive and let flow away) the first one without your mind stopping. Forget that man and encounter the next and in this way, although there are ten men, all will be dealt with successively and successfully (Tanouye 1989, 10).

In the case of your swordsmanship, for instance, when the opponent tries to strike you and your eyes at once catch the movement of his sword and you may strive to follow it, but as soon as this takes place your mind stops on the opponent’s sword. Your movements will lose their freedom, and you will be killed by your opponent. This is what I mean by stopping (Tanouye 1989, 6).

In Buddhism, this “stopping” mind is called *mayoi* (delusion); hence, “the dwelling place of ignorance and its affective disturbance” (Tanouye 1989, 7).

When the mind stops, deluded thoughts are created, and emotions are agitated. From the Zen perspective, this mind stopping is the problem, not anything external to yourself. The mind stops because of attachments. The samurai’s problem was to free himself from even the instinctual attachment to life, so that his mind would not stop in a fight to the death. If he were attached to life and feared death, his mind would be moved and stopped on the opponent’s sword. In the critical moment, when swords are crossed, he will freeze and be killed.

In life, not moving means not stopping with whatever problems come your way. The problems in life differ from sword fighting in two critical ways, however. The natural action that flows from the mind not stopping may in fact require thinking, in the sense of rational problem-solving and may not require dramatic physical movement. The “thinking” that is deplored in Zen is empty speculation, regretting the past, and worrying about the future not rationality. This thinking results in “the anguish of thoughts feeding on thoughts.” Rational problem-solving is a technique necessary to modern life, but when a person limits cognition to this technique, he can only understand reality dualistically and reduces the True Self to an ego. The actions of his life will not be wondrous, and he will not be able to transcend the existential

problems of life. Wondrous does not necessarily mean miraculous. Ordinary behavior and rational thought happening naturally without the mind stopping are wondrous.

To offer a mundane example of the difference between rational problem-solving and mind stopping, let us take doing taxes. Doing taxes with the mind not stopping means not procrastinating, being focused and rational when sorting out income and expenses, and accepting the civic obligation and legal requirement without emotional disturbance. If the mind stops while doing taxes, there is avoidance of the task, unproductive speculation about paying too much or too little, and anxiety about an outcome that you cannot change. Doing taxes will be an inefficient and unnecessarily stressful process. If a swordsman fought like that, he would be killed.

Attachments as Fixations

If your mind stops and you get stuck in a situation, it means you have an attachment that you must let go. Attachments may be considered fixations, the freezing of the sentient energy that is the essence of consciousness. We can imagine three different levels of attachments: emotional, psychological, and karmic.

At the emotional level, they lead us to cling to people, things, ideologies, situations, abilities, and so on; these are all “objects” that can cause the mind to stop when there is an attachment. This stopping leads to delusive thoughts or ignorance. Delusions and ignorance leads to affective disturbance or suffering. When attachments are threatened, the mind stops, and we experience anxiety or at the extreme, fear and panic. We become defensive and psychologically regress to less mature coping mechanisms. Physiologically the fight/flight reflex is triggered, and we suffer the negative effects of being aroused to take dramatic physical action when none is appropriate. Emotional attachments untainted by unconscious fixations are rational or “normal.” These are the attachments we must resolve as we pass through the stages of life given our society and times.

At the psychological level, an attachment is an unconscious complex, a fixation of consciousness in a pattern of behavior, feeling, and thought assimilated as a child or adopted as a once necessary attempt to cope with trauma or overwhelming stressors but which is eventually self-defeating. These fixations draw a person into situations, relationships, and so on that are associated with the unconscious complex. Out of the many possibilities we have, we create the reality which forces us to address our repressed trauma and other issues. If we succeed, we free consciousness and energy for growth. If we fail, we face another round of suffering.

At a karmic level, an attachment is *vasana*, habit-energy, a pattern in the universal mind reflecting the course of individual consciousness from time immemorial. It is a memory in the storehouse unconscious. Daisetz Suzuki explains as follows:

Psychologically *vasana* is a memory, for it is something left after a deed is done, mental or physical, and it is retained and stored up in the storehouse unconscious as a sort of latent energy ready to be set in motion. This memory or habit-energy, or habitual perfuming is not necessarily individual; the storehouse unconscious being super-individual holds in it not only individual memory but all that has been experienced by sentient beings. When the Sutra [Lankavatara Sutra] says that in the storehouse unconscious is found all that has been going on since beginningless time systematically stored up as a kind of seed, this does not refer to individual experiences, but to something general, beyond the individual, making up in a way the background on which all individual psychic activities are reflected. (Suzuki 1975, 184)

In the beginning there was the memory amassed in the storehouse unconscious since the beginningless past as a latent cause, in which the whole universe of individual objects lies with its eyes closed; here enters the ego with its discriminating intelligence, and subject is distinguished from object; the intellect reflects on the duality, and from it issues a whole train of judgments with their consequent prejudices and attachments, while the five other senses force them to become more and more complicated not only intellectually, but affectively and conatively? All the results of these activities in turn perfume the storehouse unconscious, stimulating the old memory to wake while the new one finds its affinities among the old. (Suzuki 1975, 191–192)

To summarize: The immovable mind is the mind that does not stop with whatever object it encounters. The mind stops because of attachments. Our emotional, psychological, and karmic attachments lead us to create our reality and our problems, but these problems are essentially opportunities for personal growth. Tanouye *Roshi* used to say, “If you don’t have problems, you better go buy some.”

The Marvelously Illuminating Dynamic Function of the Buddha Mind and the Screen of Many Possibilities

We are born with our karma, our metaphysical/psychological genetics from beginningless time. Our karma includes not only our DNA, but the *vasana*, the latent habit-energy or “memories” embedded in the line of consciousness that has become a human being in you. You are the culmination of a line of consciousness originating in the depths of the storehouse unconscious. In Buddhist metapsychology, the storehouse unconscious is a level of mind deeper than Jung’s collective unconscious, containing within it not only the archetypes of the human species but the habit-energy, the memories of all sentient beings. Given our karma and the circumstances of our birth, our karma plays out as we move through the stages of life.

In psychoanalysis in the process of free association, the patient projects thoughts and feelings associated with repressed memories onto the blank screen of the analytic situation. These projections come from unconscious, emotionally charged memories seeking expression. Through analysis, the repressed trauma is made conscious, and behavior is freed from the neurotic complex. In life, we are presented with a screen of many possibilities from which we “choose” depending on our karma. Imagine life flowing toward us, the possibilities continually shifting according to choices we make as well as conditions beyond our control. Whether by choice or destiny, we find ourselves in situations where we have

something to learn, an attachment to let go. If not for our attachments, we would not get stuck in suffering. We would move along in our lives like a round ball in a swiftly flowing stream, turning and turning as it slips past rocks. Existence is impermanent and ever changing. When things stay the same, we are clinging to something that prevents it from changing. We are suffering from delusions arising from the stopping of the mind.

Bankei Yotaku (1622–1693) was an iconoclastic Zen master whose teaching was to abide in the Unborn Buddha Mind. Tanouye *Roshi* was surprised at how much the spirit and energy of Bankei’s calligraphy matched his own. Below Bankei explains how we create our delusions by attaching to the traces of our karma.

All delusions, without exception, are created as a result of self-centeredness. When you’re free from self-centeredness, delusions won’t be produced. For example, suppose your neighbors are having a quarrel: if you’re not personally involved, you just hear what’s going on and don’t get angry. Not only do you not get angry, but you can plainly tell the rights and wrongs of the case—it’s clear to you as you listen who’s right and wrong. But let it be something that concerns you personally, and you find yourself getting involved with what the other party [says or does], attaching to it and obscuring the marvelously illuminating [function of the Buddha Mind]. Before, you could clearly tell wrong from right; but now, led by self-centeredness, you insist that your own idea of what’s right is right, whether it is or not. Becoming angry, you thoughtlessly switch your Buddha Mind for a fighting demon, and everyone takes to arguing bitterly with each other.

Because the Buddha Mind is marvelously illuminating, the traces of everything you’ve done are [spontaneously] reflected. It’s when you *attach* to these reflected traces that you produce delusion. Thoughts don’t actually exist in the place where the traces are reflected, and then arise. We retain the things we saw and heard in the past, and when these things come up, they appear as traces and are reflected. Originally, thoughts have no real substance. So if they’re reflected, just let them be reflected; if they arise, just let them arise; if they stop, just let them stop. As long as you’re not *attaching* to these reflected traces, delusions won’t be produced. So long as you’re not attaching to them, you won’t be deluded, and then, no matter how many traces are reflected, it will be just as they weren’t reflected at all. (Haskel 1984, 24–25)

Because the Buddha Mind is marvelously illuminating, mental impressions from the past are reflected, and you make the mistake of labeling as ‘delusions’ things that aren’t delusions at all. Delusions mean the anguish of thought feeding on thought. What foolishness it is to create the anguish of delusion by changing the precious Buddha Mind, pondering over this and that, mulling over things of no worth! If there were anyone who actually succeeded at something by pondering it all the way through, it might be all right to do things that way; but *I’ve* never heard of anyone who, in the end, was able to accomplish anything like this! (Haskel 1984, 68–69)

Bankei’s “marvelously illuminating dynamic function of the Buddha Mind” spontaneously reflects the traces of everything we have done. We cannot escape everything being revealed to us, and where there is unfinished business, we attach to these reflected traces. The mind stops on them, and we produce thoughts upon thoughts regretting the past and worrying about the future. We create a self-centered reality and suffer “the anguish of thought feeding on thought.” To use psychoanalytic terms, we project our emotionally charged, self-centered karmic and repressed memories onto the screen of the many possibilities of our lives to create the reality we need to become enlightened of our attachments.

The Immovable Body

Although Takuan’s teaching of the Immovable Mind and Bankei’s teaching of the Unborn Buddha Mind are pointing at an actual state of being which must be directly experienced, we are likely to try to grasp them conceptually. A Zen saying warns this is like washing blood with blood. A more accessible, practical approach is entering Zen through the body. Takuan says *Fudoshin*, the Immovable Mind must also be *Fudotai*, the Immovable Body (Tanouye 1989, p. 10). This is the approach emphasized at Chozen-ji. Omori *Roshi* goes so far as to say in the canon of Chozen-ji, “Zen is a mind, body, and spiritual discipline to transcend life and death (all dualism) and to thoroughly (truly) realize that the entire universe is the “True Human Body.”

Omori *Roshi* details the mechanics of breath, posture, and energy in his instructions for zazen in *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (Omori 1996, 35–63). Generally the practice is to breathe from the *hara* which is the lower abdomen, hips, and buttocks functioning as a unit with the center at the *tanden*. The *tanden*, an area two inches below the navel, is considered the psychophysical center of the human being and body. By breathing from the *hara*, energy radiates throughout the body. When exhaling, it feels that the tension in the body sinks into the lower abdomen as the breath is directed to the *tanden*. As the tension sinks down, the top of the head goes up, and the body stands taller. In the beginning of training a long, slow conscious exhalation is emphasized. We approximate this naturally when we sigh, drop the tension in our neck and shoulders, and clear our minds. When we sigh, however, there may be a tendency to collapse the body into an expression of despair rather than to expand the body into a feeling of spaciousness.

When inhaling, the lower abdomen is relaxed, like releasing the head of an eye dropper, allowing air to fill the vacuum in the lungs created by deep exhalation. Exhalation is more conscious exertion while inhalation is a controlled letting go. In both exhalation and inhalation, the breath is directed to the *tanden*, and the tension in the body set in the *hara*. Needless to say actual practice and face-to-face instruction would be far more effective than these words on paper, and even still, in the end refinement of our breathing can only occur by becoming increasingly sensitive to our own bodies.

When the body is centered at the *tanden*, it is immovable. The body is immovable because it is centered, balanced, and thus capable of movement in any direction. In the school of Aikido founded by Koichi Tohei, “the unliftable body” is practiced and demonstrated by a student first tightening his body up. In this state, he is easily lifted by two students standing at either side. When he centers himself, it is much more difficult to lift him. Paradoxically, this state of being centered and harder to move leads to the ability

to move in any direction. From martial arts, both agility of action and power to throw or strike depend on movement from the *hara*. The immovable body is the immovable mind.

Entering Zen through the body does not mean only the use of its musculature. One can enter through the senses as described below by Tanouye *Roshi* in a talk given to students training at a *sesshin* (literally meaning to collect the mind and referring to a week-long retreat of intensive training) in Chicago in October of 1984.

The mind would be helped with the eyes if you can look at things 180 degrees, always 180 degrees. Look forward as though looking at a distant mountain. Look as though you are not looking. Take a panoramic view. With the same panoramic view, just drop your eyes. As you sit here with this view, a funny phenomenon may happen. Your vision may become round as though there is only one eye. That is what they call the Third Eye. Instead of two eyes, there is just one big eye looking. Do not get attached to that. That is just a part of the *samadhi* (state of consciousness developed in training, a state of relaxed concentration in which the mind is fully present without thought). So look 180 degrees and lower your eyes. If you try to close your eyes halfway, like the books tell you, your focal awareness comes to your eyes which is not good. Some people stare, but staring is not looking 180 degrees which is a relaxed state where you can see more. Hold your two fingers out like this (arms extended to sides), see both fingers.

The best is this: Listen to all the sounds that you hear. Let the total sound come to you. I'm talking to you, but you all can hear a buzzing. You can hear that buzzing because that's part of *samadhi*. You can hear everything. So you do *zazen*, hear all the sounds but don't identify any. Let all the sounds come to you and you'll hear a ringing in your ears. It's a high pitched ringing.

Another way to do this, the book *Mumonkan* (The Gateless Barrier) says let the 84,000 pores in your body breathe. Feel your body totally. Imagine there's 84,000 hairs on your body. Feel every hair on your arms, legs, and on your body. You'll go into *samadhi*.

Smell every smell in this room. Smell, try to smell every smell. You just have to let your body go. Gradually doing these things will put you into *samadhi*.

So the very senses that cause delusions, you can turn it around and use them as a means to enter *samadhi*.

The direction to see 180° also means to hear, feel, and smell everything as well. It means to come back to your senses and be fully present.

Ukenagasu: To Receive and Let Flow Away

Returning to sword fighting as a metaphor for living, imagine problems in life as opponents we must face to realize our True Self. These opponents may be as trivial as cold water or distasteful food. If you think, "I do not want to wash my face, or I do not want to eat it," your mind has stopped, and the water and the food has taken a point on you in Kendo terms. Or the challenges may be as major as milestones in self-development as we go through the stages of life from being a baby, to an adolescent, to an adult, to a mature adult, and ultimately to realize the True Self. In Buddhist metapsychology, each of these stages can be associated with the emergence of specific structures of mind and related cognitive and motivational functions. I attempted to sketch such a developmental theory based on the metapsychology found in the *Lankavatara Sutra* (Sayama 1986, 91–98). Whether trivial or major, Takuan's teaching of the Immovable Mind instructs us to *ukenagasu* the opponent, to receive and to let flow away.

Let us imagine the flow of life. You are in the present, the past is behind you, and the future is coming. Each day brings challenges, opponents ranging from the mundane to the existential. How can you *ukenagasu* whatever problem you encounter so that even in a day filled with problems each is successively and successfully dealt with? What does it mean "to receive and let flow away"? To receive means to experience fully, not flinching, not turning away, and not repressing. It means facing your problems with your belly button forward and letting all the feelings and ramifications related to the problem come to you while you see 180°.

To let flow away means to cut your thoughts, let go of your attachments, and let things take care of themselves. In swordsmanship, it means

to proceed just as you are when facing the opponent. Takuan explains as follows:

Although you see the sword about to strike you, do not let your mind stop there. Do not intend to strike him by according his rhythm. Cherish no calculating thought whatsoever. You perceive the opponent's move, but do not let your mind to stop with it. You move on *sonomama* (just as you are), entering, and upon reaching the enemy's sword, wrench it away. Then the enemy's sword meant to strike you will instead become the sword which will strike the enemy. (Tanouye 1989, 6)

It must be remembered, however, that Takuan was instructing a master swordsman who has trained to the point of being able to throw away technique. Similarly, letting things take care of themselves is only good instruction for a mature person who is skilled in the technique of the ego. In this context, the ego is a technique for living in a civilized manner to be able to delay gratification, to learn forms, and to dualistically and rationally understand reality. A mature person in the modern world has mastered the ego and must throw it away to follow what Takuan advises and move on *sonomama*, just as you are.

In a sermon titled, "Letting things take care of themselves," Bankei said to a visiting monk:

Your wanting to realize Buddhahood as quickly as you can is useless to begin with. Since the Buddha Mind you have from your parents is unborn and marvelously illuminating, before even a single thought is produced, all things are recognized and distinguished without resorting to any cleverness. Without attaching to [notions of] 'enlightened' or 'deluded,' just remain in the state where all things are recognized and distinguished. Let things take care of themselves, and whatever comes along will be smoothly managed—whether you like it or not! That's the [working of the] Buddha Mind and its marvelously illuminating dynamic function. Like a mirror that's been perfectly polished, without producing a single thought, with no awareness on your part, without even realizing it, each and everything is smoothly dealt with as it comes from outside. (Haskel 1984, 86)

Let me use myself as a bad example. I am in my early 60s facing my mortality and the diminution of possibilities and physical capabilities. My left knee is creaky; my right shoulder has limited mobility and often pain; yardwork which I could

do in a day now takes four. I wonder about retirement, but I have twins just starting college. I live in Honolulu on a ridge overlooking Diamond Head in a small, old house for 20 years, but it has a tea room in which my wife passionately pursues her Way of Tea. The backyard borders the woods of a conservation area. We have a beagle which is an escape artist and can do all kinds of tricks. I really have nothing to complain about.

This year was one of transitions for our family with my twin sons going off to New York and Shanghai for college and my wife going to Kyoto to train in the Way of Tea for a year. It is just me and the dog holding the fort. My friends joke that I am a bachelor. That would not be bad, but I am a bachelor with a house, yard and plants, bonsai which are older than me, and a dog to take care of. I feel I am always busy with something to do. I meditate at least once a day for 30 min, often twice. Most mornings I start with *zazen*, set my mind, and try to face the day in *samadhi*.

A week ago my son came home from New York where he is studying dance. He has had a stressful but in the end exhilarating first semester struggling with roommates and a dance program which was not what he expected. After serious discussions over the phone and getting our approval to take a leave of absence from college, he changed roommates and talked to his teachers who helped him find new meaning in his classes. He really wanted to come home during the winter break.

For the first night back home his happiness sincerely showed through, but then he broke up with his high school girlfriend and failed the test for his driver's license. We had to adapt to living at home, just the two of us. My routine, busy as it was, and the clean, clear space I had created for myself was disrupted. Life was a lot more stressful having to drive him around, having him leave his stuff around, having to let him practice driving for his road test again and again, and having to endure teenage attitude. He was stopping my mind, but in a moment of irritation I realized I was acting like my father when the two of us lived together some 30 years ago. With that insight life with my son became more amusing and less irritating, not that there are not still moments.

Several days ago, I had to take the family van in for repairs. The hope was my son would have his license and he could drive the van. Since he failed, I asked a neighborhood friend to pick me up from the service station. Since the service station was close to our houses, my friend told me to call him after I checked the car in. The service station was short-staffed, and the owner who has been servicing my cars for 20 years was running around keeping things going. It took him some time to get to me, and when he did, he told me that one of the mechanics had called in sick and the valve cover gasket replacement I needed was a big job so we would have to reschedule. He assured me we could drive the car without problems, so based on my son's next driving test in several days, we settled on the next week. I called my friend to tell him he did not have to pick me up, but there was no answer. I called again a little later, but still no answer. I drove home, and when I got home, my son told me my friend just called and was looking for me at the service station. We did not have his cell, so I called the service station and had to explain the situation to an attendant. This took several attempts. I was on hold. Meanwhile, my friend called, so I told him what happened. He said he saw my car was gone so came down despite our agreement.

Next, as my son and I were about to leave for his dance studio, a college student, rooming at my house, walked out to catch the bus. I offered her a ride, and since my son told me it would not matter if we were a little late, I decided to drop her off first. I had forgotten that we also had to pick up his friend which meant backtracking and being later. My son was practicing driving and almost made a left turn into oncoming traffic at a somewhat complicated intersection. His cell phone rang. I answered and told his friend that we were on the way. His friend thought I was my son and said that he was just wondering if I was awake. Next a text came in. My son picked the phone up, but I told him just drive. He protested saying that it was a text from his friends waiting at the studio. He then ran a yellow light turning red after I told him to stop. I ordered him to pull over and took over driving. We are both pissed.

I dropped him and his friend off and went to work out at the gym. The fire alarm went off at the gym, but happily I am almost finished, so I went to the car to leave. The parking structure is narrow with weird angles. As I turned to go down the ramp, a fire engine pulled up at the bottom with sirens going. My mind stopped on that, and I made the turn onto the ramp too sharply and scraped the right rear of the van. The side of the building had hit me on the head. The next day, my son was backing out of the garage. I told him watch out for the left front of the van, but he continued and hit the wall. The good thing was that it was hard to get mad since I put a bigger dent in the car the previous day.

Clearly in one morning, despite 40 years of Zen practice, my mind stopped several times on trivial matters. It is often one thing after another, the eternal recurrence of the small that gets us because with each small thing part of our mind gets stuck and we end up being out of touch with the present reality.

A more serious matter which stops my mind is the cost of college education for my children. Both are going to private universities, one in New York and one in Shanghai. I am financing it with a home equity line of credit. I make a good living but nothing that can handle the cost of their tuitions. I am on a project with only a year to go with the audacious goal of making structural changes in the healthcare system, focusing on payment reform, information integration, care coordination, and community engagement. The goal is a sustainable healthcare system in East Hawaii on the Island of Hawaii. It feels like climbing Mt. Everest. Our team of four has made great progress, but the summit does not look closer. When I dwell on the future, my mind stops on the financial uncertainty because I still have an attachment to die in my house.

It is embarrassing to admit the things my mind stops on given the major problems we have in America and the world. I take some consolation in knowing that Omori *Roshi*, when he was in his seventies, once told his attendant that he would die a happy man if he could have the right concentration for one day. Endless refinement is possible. As a matter of practice, we should

strive to prevent mind stopping from turning into anxiety. Though the mind may stop when an attachment is threatened, with mind/body training, we can short circuit the fight/flight reflex that triggers anxiety and instead center ourselves through breathing from the *hara* and opening our senses to the present moment. Then in *samadhi*, we move on just as we are, illuminating the situation with the Buddha mind and let things take care of themselves.

If we can *ukenagasu* the existential problem of death, the small problems fall away. Life is the blink of an eye. Our time is short. What should we do with it? What is meaningful? What gives joy? What is worth caring about? Is caring the same as attaching, once again giving reality to reflected traces of unfinished business? Although these questions can only be answered by going deeply within, once we truly realize the imminence of our death, our perspective becomes existential. The petty problems drop away. When I was the vice president of customer relations at an insurance company, I once told Gladys, a supervisor of customer relations representatives who was bent out of shape by all the problems of the day, "Gladys, I know the secret about how not to get stressed. Do you want to know?" Of course, she said, "Yes." And I told her, "Gladys, you're going to die." Her eyes rolled, and she cracked up.

Let me share the story of Paul Nishimura who died in 2001 as an example of someone whose mind did not stop in the face of death. Paul was a big man who owned an auto body shop and who was a high ranking teacher of Aikido. He was the first president of Chozen-ji. He was diagnosed with cancer in July of 1999 and refused treatment, choosing to live fully as long as he could. He told me, "I'm not clinging to life. Life is clinging to me." In May of 2000 he wrote, "CT Scan-Liver almost half gone. Into left hip bone. Maybe a year left." In fact Paul had 13 months, and they were not easy for him or Junko, his wife of 29 years. Some nights when Paul could not sleep because of the pain, he would express his regret about hurting people's feelings with his manner and strong words. Junko said he limited his use of painkillers so he would not do that

again. Paul considered his pain "*bachii*" (punishment) for hurting so many people.

In his last year, Paul found talking to Tanouye *Roshi* especially meaningful. He told me "Tanouye's showing me all kinds of things." and taking a stance with a bamboo sword, he said, "This is the Unborn Mind." Tanouye *Roshi* would tell him to ask questions, but Paul said, "I do not have any more questions. I answered them all by myself already. Next time I hope I train harder so I can ask questions I can not answer by myself." On one occasion, Paul and Tanouye *Roshi* were sitting on the lanai at the temple, and Tanouye *Roshi* was feeding birds. One dove landed on the lanai, cocked its head back and forth, hopped into Paul's lap, and stayed there for several minutes. Paul said, "Now I can make the Kannon (the Goddess of Compassion.)"

The time came, however, when Paul felt he was only existing. Although he had Bankei's book on the Unborn Mind on his bed stand, he could not read because his eyes could not focus well enough. He had to fight through the stupor of pain medication to be alert and laid in bed most of the time. He found some comfort in incense and Japanese and classical music. Around the end of May, Paul decided it was time to go and stopped eating and drinking, figuring it would take 7–10 days to die. But he was afraid he might die on Junko's birthday on June 1, so he resolved to strengthen himself to celebrate her birthday. He told me, "I never knew a papaya could taste so good."

On Monday June 4 Paul walked into the hospice at the hospital on his own using his bamboo sword as a cane. He predicted he would die on the 10th. He had figured out his insurance policies would cover hospice expenses completely for one week. When I saw him the next day, he asked me to get cards and addresses for the people who had visited him. From memory, he dictated a list of these people. He wanted to write thank you notes and "clear the decks." I asked him when he was planning to do this, and he said "Within the next 12 hours."

He was still bright and playful when visitors came. Once he was describing how his mouth felt stuck together with super glue and that this

was his punishment for talking so much before. When a visitor said that he was looking good, he responded, "You must be kidding. I look like a ghost. I scare myself when I look in the mirror." Another visitor encouraged him to at least drink juice because he had lost so much weight. Paul responded, "I'm trying to be like Mahatma Gandhi." On Friday Junko said Paul laughingly told her this would be his last day. He said, "I did one thing right in my life. I married you. *Arigato* (Thank you.)"

Paul expended his remaining strength to go to the bathroom that night. He climbed from his bed to a chair, rested, climbed from the chair to the bed closest to the bathroom, rested, and then entered the bathroom. After using the bathroom, he finally opened the door and collapsed. His sons carried him back to bed. From then through Saturday, it seemed that his consciousness had left and we were simply waiting for his body to follow. But around 2:15 in the afternoon, he gave a distinct order, "Pull me up." I pulled him up, and he tried to sit on his own but collapsed. We raised the hospital bed, so he was in a sitting position. He would gradually slip down and would reach for the guardrail on the bed, so we helped him straighten up. At 4:30 he died quietly. The periods between breaths became longer and longer till finally he just never took another

breath. Paul died sitting up, one day ahead of schedule. Particularly toward the end of his life, despite his physical weakness, his energy was clear and bright, and being around him made my anxieties and pettiness disappear.

Facing fearlessly whatever happens from the eternal recurrence of the small to life and death issues, fully present moment by moment with the immovable mind, receiving and letting flow away everything enables one to say, "Every day is a fine day." Tanouye *Roshi* when asked about how to live, once said, "Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream. Merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream."

References

- Haskel, P. (1984). *Bankei Zen, Translations from the Record of Bankei*. New York: Grove Press.
- Hosokawa, D. (1999). *Omori Sogen, the art of a Zen master*. London: Kegan Paul International.
- Omori, S. (1996). *An introduction to Zen Buddhism*. London: Kegan Paul International.
- Sayama, M. (1986). *Samadhi, self-development in Zen, swordsmanship, and psychotherapy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Suzuki, D. T. (1975). *Studies in the Lankavatara Sutra*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Tanouye, T., tr. (1989) Takuan Soho's, *Fudochi Shimmyo Roku* Honolulu: Daihonzan Chozen-ji/ International Zen Dojo.