

A DEATH AND A LIFE :  
Reflections on the Death and Funeral of Reverend Master Jiyu-Kennett  
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Throughout the ages Buddhism has been practised, taught and passed on by one person to another. Every scripture, statue and example came from a person who, through training, gave their individual life back to its Source, enabling the Truth to manifest through and as that life, so that the unfolding of the Buddha's teaching can be seen and heard in this human world. Reverend Master Jiyu was such a person. Everyone who was deeply touched by her teaching, and by her funeral, will have their own insights to speak of; these are some that have stayed with me over the years.

When, in 1996, news that Reverend Master had died came, I was living at Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey, and my first thought was to offer incense in the Founder's Shrine. Even when anticipated, due to her long term illness, hearing of a death can call forth a profound, and often completely unexpected, response.

As I opened the door of the Shrine, in meditation, an image of the night sky, **1** with rays of coloured light fanning out across unknown space, came into my mind. As this beautiful and stilling sight entered into me, what arose was that all hatred stopped that day, all fear fell away that day, even in the darkest hell, beings lost in confusion paused and 'looked up' as a ray of hope penetrated the darkness of their confusion. The descriptions that we find in the Avatamsaka Sutra were there before my eyes as Reverend Master's teaching continued to show the truth of the scriptures in death as she had in life. These writings seek to convey how inconceivably far reaching is the benevolence and infinite subtlety of training. They give some idea of how far its effects and benefits are felt, as the depth of her practice, and the merit of her life, flowed out to all worlds, all forms of existence, past and present, known and unknown.

A few days later, a group of us travelled from Throssel to Shasta Abbey, in California, to take part in her funeral ceremonies. The morning after we arrived, walking down the cloister to sit with her body, which was in an open coffin before the Founder's Shrine altar, I was moved by the sight of the trees within the enclosure. When someone trains deeply all around them benefit, earth, plants, animals, stones, the very air, all 'know' and are touched by that offering. A great monk had breathed her last and, with the eye of the heart mind, I saw how the trees within the enclosure showed their gratitude, radiant in joyful salute and confirmation of her understanding and awakening.

The beauty and purity of that morning touched my heart. The inner eye of reflection will show us that the real beauty of life lies within its purity, its inherent innocence, and that all things can, and do, show gratitude. It reminds us what brought us to training; what called to us, and what calls still, for Reverend Master Jiyu is not our past. When we think of her we do not need to look back, for what she was, is and

always will be, is here, in the flow of each breath, in the call of the heart and within the eternal 'now'.

Walking into the Founder's Shrine at Shasta was like entering the purest living stillness I had known, it was as though the very air was peace itself. Sitting in meditation beside her coffin, that peace infused my being, stilling and settling me. As I sat, reflecting within, all that I found difficult to deal with back in England began to rise up into my mind, like a thick black gunge, filling it with the thought that I did not want to go back there, I did not want to leave this place of peace. Then, with the inward reflecting eye, I 'saw' Reverend Master in her ceremonial robes, standing before me, as she had in life. She looked me straight in the eye, pointed at me with her right hand, and said, with great authority, "Myōhō, let the obstacles dissolve". Her words penetrated my being with a jolt, they were as the wielding of the sword of wisdom, dissolving the heavy darkness that weighed me down, cutting me free. This caused the meditation to move within me like a tidal wave. With a mighty upsurge it rose up my back, scooping up and washing away the black weight of distress, leaving a clean open space. Looking into that bright purity, I saw that the place of peace was within me, and I knew that I never would leave it, just as I knew I would return to England and gladly train with what life had given me to work with. The heaviness of sorrow had been wiped away, as though it were nothing, and the knowing of this stayed with me, reassuring me at every step along the way.

An insight of this kind can come as a gift of grace, showing us what is possible, but there is no magic wand. We still have to train and, through the choices we make, enable the clear light of Truth to reveal what has made us the way we are; we need to see where and how sorrow gave birth to confusion, to ensure that it does not happen again.

In the coming years, every time the distress arose, and I felt what I perceived as the unfairness of life, I took it to the meditation hall, to contemplative reflection, to the Refuge: I took it to the place of peace. It was by no means all easy, but the memory of my Master, pointing the way forward and giving me the teaching, was as a beacon of light. Following that teaching, I would sit with what arose, entrusting all to the refuge of meditation, and let nothing deter me. This opened up an avenue of reflection that, once again, took me by surprise, pointing me in a direction that I had been unaware of, and which matured and clarified some years later, here in Wales, at The Place of Peace. The teaching she gave me that day, and what came forth from it, is still unfolding, still bearing fruit.

Reverend Master would often say to her monks that we must take everything that happens to us as being for our own good. This is because the way forward is always present, waiting to reveal itself, waiting for us to be receptive to the teaching it brings. In a letter to me she once wrote, "Faith will take you where you need to go, but it may not always be where you think you want to go". The choices we make will either re-enforce the illusion of something being an obstacle to us or they will enable the perceived obstacle to be drawn into the enclosure of meditative reflection, so that we can be taught by life, taught by the Dharma of our own existence and where,

ultimately, we come to see that all obstacles are no more than colourless smoke; like a mirage, they have no substance.

They have no permanent substance, because there was a time when they did not exist. Those perceived obstacles had a beginning and so they will have an end. This means that, no matter how painful or frightening the feelings that accompany them may be, we can have the confidence to sit in their midst, and, through contemplative enquiry, see through the tangle of confusion to the truth of the matter. The steadiness of training, decade after decade, the willingness to never turn away from what life has given us to work with, the longing to know the truth, all this is as water that drips onto stone, wearing it away until nothing is left but the cleanness and purity of unrestricted space. And gratitude.

From when I first heard Reverend Master Jiyu speak there was a knowing in my heart, that what she said was true. It rang through me with the clarity of a bell. There were times when we were all in the common room, and Reverend Master was giving a Dharma talk to the community, when, in my minds eye, I would 'see' her physical form fade into the light of Truth, as the teaching flowed forth. She spoke from such a deep place that I knew I was witnessing a depth of understanding, and hearing the Dharma, in a way that is rarely met.

I write of these things not to try and lionise, or idealise her, but because she never shied away from generously revealing her humanity and it was that which showed me that I too, with my quirks, foibles and imperfections, could undertake this great pilgrimage of life. She showed, by her own example, what was possible, what an ordinary flesh and blood being can do with their life when that life becomes the life of faith.

When, at Ordination in 1977, I knelt before Reverend Master Jiyu, and made my vows, looking back I see that it was an acknowledgement of what is and always will be. That it was not just for life, but for ever. This transient human form will change and die, but the vow lives on. It entered into me when I was born and its essence, its eternal truth, will flow out and on when this flesh and blood being is long gone.

I used to think that I must fulfil my vow to train, now I see it is the vow that fulfils me. It unfolds and calls, it teaches and nourishes. It brings a quality of life for which I can only say, with all my heart, "Thank you" to those who have kept this great way alive, down through the ages, so generously passing it on to others.

The Master disciple relationship is a complex gift that asks much of both parties. It is like nothing else and makes much possible. The meaning of it is still unfolding, fanning out, within my mind and life, endlessly calling me forth. Perhaps this is because it did not begin with a life nor will it end with a death.

Looking back across the decades I see that many things stand true at the same time. On one level we have the death of someone whose time in human form on this planet is over and a life, my life, that continues. At the same time training shows me that

there is only one life; within all the differences, all the changes, the manifesting of transient appearances (birth), and their passing (death), there is that which was, is and always will be, the same: the eternal 'now'.

The Great Mystery of that eternal source is itself the essence of the vow and from Its depths a new quality of life, of being, unfolds, as the Great Mystery flows on. I do not know where It is taking me, only that I am in safe hands and that I have so much to thank Reverend Master Jiyu for.

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Footnote:

1 The night time starry sky is an image that, for me, represents 'there is nothing from the first'. It is the Great Mystery that we find at the heart of the sitting place, which Reverend Master Jiyu called, "the fullest nothing you will ever know". It is spoken of in the invocations, as at Wesak, where we have *Through the Starry Sky at Midnight*. The scriptures say 'we live in the world as if in the sky', this is the sky they refer to, and it contains my Master, it is where we meet as one, and that 'one' falls away.

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