

Shoyo Sensei's Dharma Message:

Thoughts On Obon: A Transition

I met Kenji for the first time at the beginning of 2005. He already had an Alzheimer's disease and was taken care of at a care home. I wanted to introduce myself as a new minister of his temple. He was wearing a nice pair of tennis shoes, looked sturdy and was in a wheelchair. "Hello, Kenji san. I am your new Sensei. I am happy to meet you." He looked at me, thinking, perhaps, "A woman Sensei?" He might know my husband, I thought. Hoping to find some connection with him, I said, "I am also Rev. Taniguchi's wife and live at the Alameda Buddhist Temple." Then, he smiled. I was happy. I talked about the weather, our temple and temple members. He did not talk much and sometimes dozed during my talking. Before I left, I asked him, "Kenji san, I'll be back. Don't forget about me till then!" He opened his eyes and responded with a big smile. His million-dollar smile invited me to visit him again and again in the following weeks and months. Each time, I found different topics to be connected more with him, sometimes about the flower business he used to have, sometimes about his family. Searching for words from his lost memories and languages, he told me, such as, "Carnations were difficult to grow. They constantly grow from sides. We constantly had to trim them" or "I have five sisters. My Mom was a school teacher in Japan," Listening to him was an honor to me. I soon gradually became busier with my other temple schedules. I could only visit him less than before. But, when few months later I re-visited him and asked, "Do you remember me?" he said, "You are my Sensei from Alameda"!

On that day, I brought him a wrist O-Nenju with a *Namuamidabutsu*. "This is for you. I hope you like it." He smiled. But, then, I did not oversight his 'naughty' look at me, with saying, "I'm not ready." I thought he was trying to joke. Then, "officially" I "preached": "*Namuamidabutsu* is not for the dead person. It is for you and me who are alive to live positively and powerfully everyday. Think this O-Nenju as your temple. Since you cannot come to the temple easily, I brought the temple for you." He again gave me a smile and I put it on his wrist. When I was leaving, suddenly he moved his upper body forward from his wheelchair to stand and walk. He wanted to go to the temple with me, I thought.

At each time of my visit, however, I recognized more his loss of memory. He dozed more. He was soon transferred to the Ume-No-Ki Garden Senior Home, his temple's brand new care home. I could visit him daily. All the caregivers are so warm-hearted. I was happy to see him always being surrounded with the staff. He was loved by all.

As winter came, he got cold. Suddenly he became much weaker and could not eat. He looked as if he was in his seventies, but, indeed, he was already 90 years old. As his doctors said, at his age, anything trifling and small could become a trigger for a sudden change. He looked as if he was approaching the end stage of life. He was introduced to a hospice program. His two sons, Walter and Victor, and their family members visited him every day and spent more time with him. But, his condition got worse. When a piece of food or small amount of liquid was put in his mouth, he seemed to have completely forgotten what to do with them. He seemed to have lost the meaning of food, an action to eat, chew and swallow. I had to realize this was a nature of Alzheimer's disease. He was powerlessly in a wheelchair. His family could only be with him.

One evening, Victor said to me, "In our society, many have a difficulty in accepting their beloved one's death. My brother and I, however, have started to talk about it and began to humbly understand and accept this reality that our father will be soon leaving us. We understand now that no one can do anything for it. Even our father cannot do anything. Sensei, please conduct a funeral service for him at the temple. We want to send him off with most peace, full thankfulness and profoundest love." After carefully listening to him, I told him: "I am glad to know that you are beginning to accept his passing. Both of you truly took the best

care of your father. The last care that you can give to your father is to express your love and thankfulness to him. That is all what we can do. At funeral services, people talk about their love and thankfulness to the beloved one. But, they cannot hear you any more. Then, why should we wait to express your love and appreciation to your father until his last breath and close of his life? Your father definitely deserves to hear your love and thankfulness again and again now. I am sure that he himself also wants to tell each of you how much he loved you and how much he thanked you. Why not have a final goodbye service and a living funeral service while he is able to hear you?"

It is not easy for a minister to say such a thing to the family who are in desperate sorrow. But, I knew from my experiences that the final exchange of love and thankfulness definitely changes the perception of reality radically and profoundly into a positive way on both sides, the dying and the family. I also have to have a strong confidence in the family and also to myself when I suggest it. And in this case, I had. To this idea, immediately and strongly, Victor agreed. Saying that, he right away called his brother, Walter, on his cell phone. Soon later, all of us decided to have a living funeral service on the following day in Kenji's room at the Ume-No-Ki.

At 4:00 P.M. next day, I went to Kenji's room. Everyone was there, and Kenji was in his wheelchair powerlessly. His eyes were closed and he looked as if he was unconscious. He was put in a beautiful blue T-shirt with a logo of "Grandpa," a Wagesa around his neck and a nice O-Nenju in his hand. We all moved our own chairs so that we could surround him. I noticed that in the room, beautiful carnation flowers were arranged and his beloved and beautiful wife's picture was placed right next to his face.

First I said to Kanji's granddaughters, "We all don't want your grandpa to leave us. But, we should not ask him not to die or not to leave us. He cannot do anything to such request. It is even cruel to ask him. Let's tell him how much you love him, how thankful you are." Then, I said to Kenji, "Kenji san, thank you so much for your tremendous dedication and commitment to the temple for a long time. All your family members are here now. But, don't worry about them. Don't worry about you, too. Buddha is always with you. Let's recite O-Nembutsu together. You are returning to the Buddha's Land of Supreme Happiness and Joy. Your parents and wife are all waiting for you there. We all also will be there, too. You can start breathe there. Don't worry to breathe here anymore." After that, each expressed their most wonderful messages to him one after another. To our surprise, Kenji each time turned this face toward the person who was talking, and paying very careful attention, listened to them. His eyes were clear and focused to each person one after another. I have never seen such a Kenji. More than that, when some said that one of his granddaughters could not come because of her school schedule, he shrugged his shoulders! Being surprised, we looked at each other! It was unbelievable, indeed. We knew that he himself was also sending his love and thankfulness to each of us. We all thought that he was truly living his life fully and thankfully with utmost human dignity and true quality of live all during the time.

At the end of the service, I sang the Gatha "Ondokusan" close to his ears. A few days later early in the morning, Kenji completed his last breath in this world. Our hearts were again filled with sincerest thankfulness to him. I knew that the family will miss him much and want to talk with him again and again, but that feeling is definitely different from pain and suffering. The family extended the very best care to him and there was no regret.

Many of us believe that when a person has Alzheimer's disease or any other serious illnesses, he/she loses human dignity and the quality of life. We think that it is impossible for such a person to live fully and truly. Many believe that "All those days with health, success and youth WERE the prime time of life." Actually, a person who knew Kenji's young and healthy days with a successful business and with name and fame, said to me: "It is so painful to see him sitting in a wheelchair without memories and being fed."

But, did Kenji lose the prime of his life?

I never met Kenji when he was a very successful flower businessman, was the president of the American Carnation Society and devotedly helped our temple. I never met Kenji when he enjoyed skydiving and bungee jumping with full health. In those days, he must have shared success, knowledge, skills, positions, capabilities and many more with his family, friends and society. But, after he lost his words, memories, health and youth, he was still living with full thankfulness and love. He was living his true prime moment of his life with his full power in a wheelchair. He taught us that the true quality of life is, after all, a quality of mind. Kenji taught us that a person can live his each moment fully. He taught us that a person can have the true prime of life without health, name, fame, youth and position. Just as he shared so much with others, he shared with us the moment of truth of aging, of the precious value of silence, of the truth of life/death, the truth of “who I am,” the truth of death and the truth of human dignity. In this way, he showed that a person’s entire life is filled with the prime of life in its own way in a different sphere.

At the funeral service, I said as follows: “I don’t think that the funeral service is only to celebrate the beloved one’s life. I also don’t think it is to say the final goodbye to our beloved one. I think the funeral service is the time that we pay the highest tribute to the beloved one. The “highest tribute” means to carefully listen to the true hope and vow of the beloved one to each one of us and to live and carry on our life positively and happily following the vow we receive.” Kenji as a Buddha is saying: “As Sakyamuni Buddha taught, our life is filled with eight worldly conditions: success / failure, good reputation / bad reputation, praise / blame, and good conditions / bad conditions. He also taught that the true happiness is not to have all the goods and successes. But, the true happiness is to live fully without being dominated and shaken by both ups and downs. Anything could happen in our life. Live positively whatever happens. Whatever happens, we are still OK. This is the true Buddhist way of living. This is the life with the highest quality of live.”

Buddha Kenji said, “My two sons, thank you so much for taking good care of me for a long time. Thank you, everyone, for sharing your life with me. Life is beautiful. Life is wonderful. Life is too short to become stressful. Life is too short to fight. Enjoy life. Please take care of not only your body, but also your mind.”

Kenji san, thank you so much.

Gassho,
Namuamidabutsu
Shaku Shoyo

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