

Halted Breath

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In the depths of mid-winter Maine, my final year of college, a close friend of mine from high school drowned in a river in India. Clutched by an initial wave of shock and pain, I folded in on myself, on the floor of my apartment. Tears flowed. The breath entered and left my chest shallow and halting. When I surfaced and found my lungs again, I settled into a very deep quiet. In the days and weeks following, I found myself healing Tyler's death, weaving that loss back into my life, with a surprising degree of acceptance. The experience opened a window for me, a window through which I could see my own impermanence vividly, like blinding sunlight. Rather than his death initiating a flood of questions, fear and uncertainty, I found quiet.

A month after Tyler's death, I learned that a Zen meditation group met in the basement of a home two blocks away from my apartment. I began sitting with the group once a week. I committed to trying at least three times before making any decisions about this 'Zen Buddhist' thing. That was in February of 1996. I'm still sitting.

During the first year and a half I sat zazen (sitting meditation), I harbored many questions about whether or not I could really do this. Despite the witness born by so many dedicated American practitioners, I wondered if I had to be Japanese. I thought maybe there was something genetic, something about being a young white, American woman, which would prohibit me from 'getting it'. During my first lengthy meditation retreat, through the teaching of Zoketsu Norman Fischer, through the earnest and dedicated practice of the others participating, and through hours of zazen, it became clear that *I* was the only thing separating me from this practice. I realized there was nothing else hindering me from making a commitment to this path, that it was all right there. I sat that retreat three weeks before leaving on a one-way ticket to Nepal. Among the many things in my backpack and pockets, I tucked the intention to continue my daily meditation practice and to carry that practice off the cushion into my daily life.

On the surface, it may not seem that going to Nepal to spend a year doing social service work was a very selfish thing. **It was.** The first time I went to Nepal was during my third year of college. Having experienced the most tremendous happiness there, I was determined to return. I wanted to hold that joy again, puzzle out how much of it arose because of my surroundings, and how much of it I could find or cultivate in myself. Upon my return a year later, I found that joy,

and found it inextricably interwoven with a myriad of other experiences.

Less than an hour outside of Kathmandu (twenty minutes by foot, another half hour by bus) a small, two story mud and brick house stands nestled among other homes and sculpted terraces. Nepalis come from three remote districts to seek refuge in that house. They come walking, with complaints of dysentery and skin conditions. They come on the backs of others, their bodies wasted by tuberculosis and cancer. They come hoping to find a place to sleep, food, and someone who will help them navigate the health care system in Kathmandu. I spent a year operating that house with one co-worker. Together, we learned to meet the varied and challenging needs of those who arrived on our doorstep.

Before leaving for Nepal, I considered seeking out a teacher or community in the Kathmandu Valley to support my meditation practice. And yet I created mental obstacles between me and the Buddhist traditions most prevalent in Nepal. I hungered for the sparse aesthetic of the Japanese style zendo (meditation hall). Rather than reaching out to learn what I could by embracing the traditions of Buddhist practice in Nepal, I honored them from a distance.¹ Each morning I sat zazen in my bedroom, located right above the outdoor tap stand where my landlord washed his face and cleared his sinuses loudly. I set aside that time to quiet and open myself to each day.

I carried a mala, used it to bring me back to my breath in moments of impatience and frustration at the hospital, on the buses and tempos, and striding through the old bazaar. I visited Bouddha, one of the major Buddhist stupas in the Valley, each week. Elder Sherpas and Tibetans shuffled along the smoothed stone path and whispered mantras with mala in one hand, prayer wheel in the other. My heart swelled each time I joined the sea of people circumambulating. I took refuge in the writings of Dogen, Suzuki Roshi, and Maura Soshin O'Halloran. I also learned to see teachers all around me: my own impatience and inappropriateness; the humbling process of becoming more skilled in a foreign language; and my fluctuating ability to be present with the suffering of those entering our house. Each patient became my teacher.

During the spring, our patient load doubled. As soon as we sent two patients home, three more arrived. We didn't have enough plates. People slept beneath frayed mosquito nets on the covered porch. Bhuwan, my co-worker, and I were worn ragged.

Palgi Sherpa arrived at our house in late spring, her forty year-old body emaciated and frail. A palpable mass, the size of a small child's fist, sat prominently several inches below her sternum. A fistula had developed from her intestines out into several open wounds on her back, through which puss and feces were excreted. The mass in Palgi's abdomen was malignant. There were no choices, no chemo, no operation. The doctors dismissed us, offering only

¹ After finishing my work in the Kathmandu Valley, I did spend a month at Bigu nunnery. However, my intention there was not to pursue formal study. Rather, I went to experience life in a monastic setting and spend time with a tremendously vibrant group of women.

aspirin for Palgi's physical pain. We, in turn, had to discharge Palgi from our patient house.

Her family did not believe she would survive the journey back to her village. They reluctantly took her to a tiny, single-room apartment in the city where they left her frequently alone. They were afraid of this woman whose body had become so ill and 'dirty'. The morning she left, tears streamed down her sunken cheeks. A mass, as solid as that in her own abdomen settled in my stomach and festered.

After her move, I visited Palgi every two to three days. I cleaned the sores on her back. I made us tea and bought her groceries. I believe the most important thing I did was simply sit with her as her body deteriorated. I sat with her loneliness, listened when she wanted to talk, sat in silence when she didn't. Early on, I visited to resolve my own guilt, that lump in my stomach which came from having to send her away. But the guilt waned. In its place a deep gratitude arose. I felt honored to sit with this woman as she prepared for death. For me, there was no catharsis. Each time I sat holding her hand very simply reaffirmed that my own body was no different than Palgi's.

One Friday evening, the heat of late May hanging languid in the air, Bhuwan and I were called down our patient house. {Sumi- you had written 'a' this is all occurring within our little hostel} Limp from a grueling week, I rounded the corner of the house to see Bahadur, a patient with drug resistant TB, writhing on his back, his arms flailing. He was hollering at people we could not see. Tension spread from the base of my spine throughout my entire body. I was afraid he would die there, at the door of our house, and inspire fear in our other patients. His nephew, Pravin, took him to the emergency room. I surrendered to the idea Bahadur would not come back. He died of cardiac arrest and drug-induced hepatitis the following night.

I met Pravin at the hospital the morning after the death. Together, we went to collect Bahadur's body. Inside, the morgue it was cool and smelled stagnant. We found Bahadur's body wrapped in white gauze. Pravin picked up his shoulders. I wrapped my fingers around his tiny ankles and we lifted his body. I thought it would sag in the middle, expected his tiny body to be unwieldy. It was stiff, like a pine board, dead not even twelve hours. I gazed at his shape through the gauze, thinking about the words we had exchanged two days ago, thinking about the voice which had come from this body, now silenced. We moved him to a stretcher, into the back of a 'dead ambulance', and headed for the pyres of Pashupati.

I remember the heat of that day, that time of year before the rains have come to cool the earth and fill the terraces. I learned to walk slowly on such days. That morning moved slowly with me, giving me enough time to absorb every detail. I had walked by the pyres a dozen times, always covering my mouth, choking on the smell. However, I had

not before witnessed the cremation of any of the patients who died during my work. I felt a need to lay Bahadur's body to rest, to see a body just like my own reduced to ash.

Fifty feet away another cremation was in process. One rigid leg stretched out of the flames, muscle and skin remaining from the knee socket down. I stared without shame. As the sons of the deceased attempted to push the leg back into the blaze, that corner of the pyre collapsed. The leg tumbled to the ground. With some difficulty, they pushed it back into the flames with a lengthy bamboo pole. I stood, dumb-struck as this human leg was pushed around like another piece of bamboo.

Pravin lit a small piece of wood and circled the body three times. He pulled the gauze back from his uncle's face, set it on his lips, and re-covered the face sending a ribbon of smoke into the air, almost a visible, final breath. The fire was lit. Long wet grass was laid on top of the body. As the flames leapt upward they caught his hair first. It sizzled and coiled in on itself, blackened. I was overwhelmed by an almost child-like fascination with every detail. I did not cry, nor did I feel mournful. I saw this as Bahadur's healing. The fire consumed the flesh on his legs first, and eventually the attendant used a long bamboo pole to bend the legs back onto the abdomen. Occasionally he would bring the pole down hard on the body, gaining a sense of what was left. When the legs were no longer bone and tissue, but smoke and ash, the body was carefully rotated using the pole, no lurching, no falling limbs. Bahadur's skull and abdomen faced down into the earth, eating the fire.

I stood and observed each detail, mildly numb, pensive, very much humbled by how our bodies burn as quickly as wood. It took only three hours for his body to be reduced to ash and swept into the creeping Bagmati river. There was nothing left, not a bone, not a piece of hair, not a fingernail.

I walked away from Bahadur's cremation. I took a bus into the city to visit Palgi. Arriving at the bottom floor of her tiny apartment building, I paused and steadied myself, cheek and palm pressed against the cool cement wall. I shut my eyes for a moment and breathed more deeply than I had since the quiet of my morning *zazen*. I could smell the infection walking up the stairwell toward Palgi's room. I walked away from death and was walking again into death. We sat quietly after I explained where I had come from. That day, it was she who held my limp hand. We sat in silence; my eyes and mind still full of flames.

Palgi died within a month after I finished work and left the Valley to travel in the hills. On our last visit, she spoke of her own village, which was not far from where I would be traveling. We spoke of how clean the air and water are out of the Valley, how cool the higher hills are during the summer time. I remember sitting hand in hand, the skin

taut over the long bones of her fingers, two rings, one of turquoise, one of coral, hanging loosely below the knuckles. She closed her eyes, felt the cool of that air, and the sweetness of that water.

Palgi. Bahadur. Padam. Bhim Kumar. Om Bahadur. Pokchi. Tilak bahadur. Karmarenji. Man Kumari. Charlie. Bob. Freda. Tyler. Sitting, holding the death of each of these people, the frailty and transience of my own human shell has become more and more clear. Touching the weakened and broken skin of those like Palgi and Bahadur, who I believed were closer to death than I was or am, has unveiled my own fear and wavering acceptance of death. I do not believe Nepalis fear death any more or less than Americans do. However, in this country we have managed to distance ourselves from and sanitize the process and act of dying. Nepalis do not have this luxury.

I witnessed Palgi's fear in the face of her own death. I watched people shrink away from touching her and others who were extremely ill. I found, in myself, an ability to sit quietly with that fear. It became progressively clear, that to move into work with death and dying in this country would both challenge and support my Buddhist practice and the way I want to engage this life.

In this country and others, thousands of home-based hospice agencies mobilize resources into the homes of people dying with cancer, ALS, AIDS, dementia, pulmonary and other diseases, every single day. Families learn to be caregivers for their loved ones. Hospice staff provide support for families to address everything from pain management and bed sores to spiritual support, respite care and bathing, to funeral arrangements. The first door which opened to me in this field was in the area of grief and loss. Families and friends of those who have died find themselves staring into their own wounds, as I did at the time of Tyler's death. The scar of that loss, unique for each person, becomes an integral part of one's life. Slowly, each person learns how to heal the wound and weave strength and growth back into the tapestry his or her life. I spend my days supporting people who are holding the severed strands of their own tapestry.

Most days I find myself able to hold their pain with patience and mindfulness. At the end of our dialogue, I am able to let go of their suffering, like blowing a soap bubble into the wind. On rare occasions, I find myself drawn into their wound, the magnitude of the loss so profound. Only a few weeks ago, toward the end of a lengthy bereavement phone call, I became restless, as if in need of air. I hung and felt as if the entire core of my body had been transformed into dry, coarse sand. I was so profoundly struck by the magnitude of loss in this person's life. I sat on the floor, right in the middle of that darkness and cried.

A lengthy bike ride and several hours later, that very raw pain grew into a gift. In this work, I find it easy to settle into a sense that "I know." I examine a chart, read through the social work assessment, and think that I might have

some clue about how that wound feels for that individual. The reality is, I have no clue. That experience also reminded me how acrid grief can taste, and renewed my ability to sit with that bitterness.

There are days when my meditation practice feels confined to a half an hour of superficial breathing on a small black cushion. Thankfully, there are others days on which the same practice sustains my effort to sit as completely with the bitterness of pain as I do with the strength and joys of healing, with death as fully as I do with life.