

Cancer

Rev. Master Seikai

[One year ago I was diagnosed with a form of leukemia described below, and about six months later wrote the following article. Another six months after writing it, I'm still recovering and my prospects for good health and a long life are reasonably high.]

Pick up a magazine or a newspaper and somewhere in the thing there will probably be a reference to someone who battled with cancer and either won or lost. Obituaries tend to have several such references, in this case with regard to the lost battles. That our society couches having cancer in the terminology of war – doing battle with cancer – says a lot about our society, and nothing good about cancer. In fact, the entire frame of reference is the problem, whereas cancer itself is just an illness, a part of life, and a huge opportunity for a human being.

Like most people, I viewed cancer with mild apprehension for most of my life, sort of vaguely hoping that I wouldn't get it. So, last autumn, when I was in fact diagnosed with cancer, although I wasn't very surprised given that I knew my physical condition wasn't all that great at the time, I had to immediately adjust to a new reality: the reality of having cancer and what to do about it. My oncologist tends to put an up-beat tone onto whatever I'm facing and experiencing, which I have assumed is a professional adaptation to dealing with patients who have been conditioned to dread the disease they have, and struggle with it.

But why would it be necessary to struggle with or battle cancer? To me, the question was framed very differently: on the one hand I could let it go untreated and face a slow decline into a fairly uncomfortable death, and on the other, I could go along with the normal protocol of treatments and see if I come out the other side a well human being. Although I didn't really blink at the time, I have to admit that the first option had a certain appeal; it would have offered me the option of dying, and that is mildly attractive. I haven't lived an easy life, and at times death has seemed to me like a freeway exit that one might take out of the commotion, difficulty and strife I've experienced on the highway of being human.

But upon any reflection whatsoever, it is immediately apparent to me that my life is not really my own to discard in such a fashion; in other words, many people would be quite disappointed with me for choosing death over life, and they would have reason to feel that way. Moreover, cancer, in and of itself, is not such a bad thing as we have been led to believe in a society that worships youth, abhors old age, and fears death. Cancer is simply one of several hundred things that can and eventually will go wrong with the human body as it ages, loses strength and elasticity, and becomes vulnerable to the usual gang of diseases that tend to knock people off when they reach an advanced age.

So why all the fuss over cancer? Yes, it kills a lot of people, often “before their time,” although that particular turn of phrase suggests that we have an expectation as to how many years we ought to live, and if anything cuts it short, we have been cheated out of our previously allotted life span of 70, 80 or more years. The more philosophical person might think that, ‘well, something's going to kill you – it might as well be cancer.’ That seems to me like a step in the right direction, but I think there are a few more that can be taken.

My training as a Buddhist monk has been, at least in part, to bow to everything that comes along, or in a metaphorical sense, has been put into my alms bowl. I can easily think of cancer as being a type of food which has been put into my alms bowl, and as such it is a thing to actually be grateful for; this is not the usual attitude towards cancer, but I can assure the reader that it is an entirely liberating attitude to have about the whole matter.

In this light, the light of having a reverential or grateful attitude towards a thing that most of humankind regards as thing to be avoided, cancer can be seen as something with which it is possible to have a relationship of mutual cooperation. So, that has been my attitude; I do not see cancer as a killer with which I have entered into battle, but rather, it is a new friend that I have made, which has the potential to

teach me a lot of things about life that I now have the opportunity to learn. In my experience thus far, cancer is teaching me some things that I've either put off paying attention to for a long time, or of which I just didn't have any idea.

Over the past decade or so, medical research on cancer has come up with a different view of the disease: most adults have cancer cells in their bodies, but under normal circumstances, the immune system culls them out, just like any other disease, and so most of the time one would be completely unaware of having cancer cells, regardless of the type of cell which has mutated and multiplied to whatever extent. In my case, white blood cells in my bone marrow had mutated into what are called hairy cells; these hairy cells, with their peculiar Medusa-like appendages, simply clog up the bone marrow, thus preventing the normal flow of newly manufactured blood cells out into general circulation in the blood stream.

The treatment for my kind of cancer, which is known as hairy cell leukemia, is to simply knock dead all the white blood cells you possibly can by means of a specific kind of chemotherapy. Having done that, new, healthy, white blood cells can repopulate the bloodstream. When I heard my diagnosis, this is the treatment that I readily agreed to under-go, as opposed to letting it kill me, or trying to take some sort of alternative route involving a health food regimen, vitamins, etc.

On one level, cancer is telling me that I have a compromised immune system, and that this is something that I need to pay close attention to. Why is it compromised? In my case, working too hard over long periods of time has weakened various components of my body, making the whole of my body vulnerable to a small collection of mutated white blood cells – which got out of hand. In other words, there is a message here for me, and it is time that I make some important changes in my life. And this is a very commonplace thing that people experience: a wake-up call of some kind.

Cancer patients who survive widely acknowledge that the disease has changed them for the better; that they now view life as more precious than they formerly did; they realize life is fairly short, can be cut off suddenly, and what truly matters is that they cultivate love for the people around them, and not get worked up about little things in life that go wrong or do not work out as they would like them to. These are, of course, very Buddhist lessons; there are undoubtedly numerous books written by cancer survivors on this theme. The point I would like to reinforce is that cancer is not the enemy; one can choose to view it in that way, but that is up to you. Alternatively, cancer is a teacher, and has valuable lessons to give, even if it kills you. There is a wonderful story in the book *Bones of the Master*, in which the Chinese Buddhist monk Tsung Tsai, who is a gifted healer, visits a friend of the book's author, George Crane. Tsung Tsai takes the man's pulses, looks him over very carefully – he is dying of cancer – and says to him, "I'm very sorry Jewels, I cannot help you. You must be dying." Julian went white. Speechless. As I did. Tsung Tsai took and held his hands. "Don't worry, Jewels. Everybody need die," he said. "I can give you prescription for pain. Never feel again. Very comfortable. Would you like?" Julian died two weeks later. As promised, he felt no pain."

There are three basic possible outcomes with cancer: one is to be treated successfully and live for however long you live after that; the second is to go into remission for a period of time, have the cancer come back or metastasize, and go through more treatment until it kills you; the third option is that it simply kills you, like Julian, in a couple weeks or months. Right now it appears that I will most likely fall into one of the first two possible outcomes; it might come back and kill me later, but either way, Tsung Tsai is dead right: everyone need die. It is that simple, and that outcome would be fine. The medical profession in America views that outcome as a failure on their part, but they are simply mistaken in having that attitude. Everyone need die; within the great sea of life, beings are dying and being born constantly, thousands, millions of beings, including human ones, every second of every day. It's just how things are; why do we fight a battle against death? What are we afraid of?

As it happens, I can answer that question. As my Master taught, we human beings come into this world as the result of a "critical mass of karma," which, owing to the universal laws which apply to life in the human realm, necessitate a human rebirth. To the extent that a human being purifies that critical mass by means of living a virtuous life, doing good for sentient beings, and especially by means of practicing meditation, he or she reduces the weight of that karma, so to speak, and it is that weight which we fear as

death and the dissolution of the body draws near. It is the weight of separation that we, or beings in the past whose karma we have inherited, have created between ourselves and the Universal Mind, the Buddha Mind, or the Unborn.

Cancer is just one player on this huge field of life and death. There is nothing to fear within the enormous playing out of life and death – it is just the nature of the universe, the way things are. We might as well relax and learn to be happy with the way things are, and give up hoping that they be any different. So it is with cancer and death: if cancer is the agent assigned to you to escort you into the process of death and a future birth into a realm of existence that is appropriate to how you have lived your life – wherein you either reduced or added to the critical mass of karma that you began with – then cancer is your friend and guide in that process.

Just as I am writing these words, I have visited my oncologist and learned that a bone marrow biopsy, extracted from my hip a few weeks ago, has come back negative. This means that I have no more mutated, hairy cells clogging up my bone marrow, making life difficult for the normal blood cells that have been manufactured and are trying to get through the wall of the bone, and into the bloodstream. This is good news, as it means that, for the time being, anyway, I'm cured.

But what does it mean in the long run? I still have to live my life, I'm no longer young and I can't pretend that I have the energy of a young person. The reality is that I'm middle-aged, have had two serious bouts of prolonged, acute fatigue in my life, hairy cell leukemia, and have to take very good care of myself. This is not a bad place to be, and actually I'm quite happy with it. Human life is an enormous gift for as long as it lasts, and it is not something to be taken for granted, even if you are young. Cancer, car accidents, drugs and suicide take the lives of a great many people younger than myself. I have the ongoing opportunity to continue the momentum of deep religious practice, and to offer the merit of that practice to all living beings in the universe. Doing so has the effect of making the importance of this seemingly real and important self diminish, and uniting me spiritually with the Universal Mind, Great Compassion, or whatever name one chooses to give it. My Master would sometimes say "He, She, It."

There was an American author of Buddhist books who became ill with cancer while he was still middle-aged and evidently not quite ready to die, because he wrote an angry, defiant poem entitled *F--- You, Cancer!* not too long before it killed him. I never heard my Master say anything scornful about diabetes, the disease that ultimately killed her, in combination with an ordinary respiratory infection. In fact, she seemed to have great respect for her disease, learned to live with it, and managed to survive 25 years with the disease following its onset. That level of acceptance was something that she could not help but teach those of us who were around her and took care of her in her last few years.

In the late 19th Century, an experiment was conducted using dogs, whose pancreases were removed to prove that diabetes is caused by a malfunction of this organ. This particular experiment solved the riddle of diabetes, eventually leading to the development of insulin injections, the treatment which keeps the disease at bay in humans. My Master had a great depth of gratitude and sympathy for those dogs, all of which slowly died from dog diabetes, since the function of the pancreas is to break down and store sugar during the digestion process for use later.

The contrast between the two above attitudes towards disease – one of them being cancer, the other diabetes – is striking. Zen Master Jiyu often made a point of saying that there are Bodhisattvas who teach by means of a bad example, an example of what not to do, and others who teach by means of a positive example, showing what to do. Rather than disparaging someone who exhibits poor or unwise behavior, she was able to see the person as a Bodhisattva who taught what not to do in a given situation. She herself never once claimed to be perfect or infallible, and would often say, "I never said I was a saint," which made it clear that she was simply an ordinary human being with faults; but she was also a human being with a great deal of wisdom that was the result of her training as a Buddhist monk, and that wisdom was something she was able to teach others, and have it rub off just by being in her presence. Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha, died at the age of 80 as a result of eating tainted food, which was part of a meal prepared for a large group of monks by a devout lay person. So that the donor would not feel grief-stricken as a result of having given food to the Buddha which a short time later would kill him, the

Buddha made it clear to the assembly that there was great merit in the offering because it allowed him to die peacefully, an event known as his entry into *Parinirvana*. He made it clear that he was grateful for the offering, which he knew in advance was to be his last, a wonderful example of acceptance and gratitude – two of the most important attitudes to be cultivated as a Buddhist. And if we think about it, these two attitudes are what pave the way towards a peaceful life and a peaceful death.

I have been the recipient of an incalculable amount of good, in the form of excellent medical care – both from my oncologist and from a practitioner of Chinese medicine and acupuncture – from many generous donors who contributed to a medical fund that our temple set up to offset the costs of my health insurance deductible, and the fact of being able to afford health insurance in the first place, which made it possible to receive the treatment I did. I have also been the recipient of merit offered by people far and wide with the Buddhist Sangha; I have even had people in Christian prayer groups pray for me. So, taken as a whole, I am a fortunate being. My recovery hasn't always been easy – I still sometimes go through periods of depression and low energy – but those things are part of the landscape of being alive, and it doesn't help to fight them any more than it did to “fight” the disease of cancer in the first place. I pray that I can be worthy of all the good I have received and make full use of the life and health that I have as an offering to the Three Treasures of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.