

Don't Miss Our Appointment With Life

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This is because that is.

Blue Cliff Monastery has been closed since the COVID-19 pandemic began spreading around the United States. The Monastery is still closed today. This pandemic has caused the world to be caught in a crisis for nearly a year now and the crisis continues. COVID has divided friends and family from each other, has made it so that they cannot see each other in person and cannot gather together. Because of a fear of infection people do not dare to come close to each other. In our world today, how many people are having to live alone?

Millions of people have gotten the COVID virus and have been quarantined alone in a room or in the hospital. They have been forced to not only live alone, but also to die alone. COVID has taken the lives of millions of people in the world including my youngest brother, the only remaining brother in my family. Even our beloveds cannot be by the side of a person who is passing away with COVID-19. My brother passed away by himself. He was alone in his passage, with none of his sisters, his wife, or his children able to be with him. Millions of people have gone like that. This is a depressing and tragic situation in our world today.

On the other hand, during the lockdown, in order to prevent the spread of the virus, this world certainly became quiet for a time. The roads and the towns were deserted. The sky suddenly was clear because no planes were flying. Everyone gathered at home. Families were together. Parents had a chance to be close to their children. People who loved each other had a chance to re-establish their relationship. People temporarily stopped their wandering, stopped their “business” and their running, stopped their worrying about their projects and plans. Most people had time to go back to themselves, had time to look deeply into themselves, had time to gain clarity about their beloved ones.

There are many people who are full of hatred for COVID-19 because it has taken the lives of many of their beloved ones, because it spreads fear and separation, and because it has created a crisis for the entire world. But when we look deeply into the virus, we can see that it did not appear by itself. According to the Middle Way Sutra, there is nothing that has a separate self. Nothing is created by itself. This is because that is. This is not because that is not. This is born because that is born.

This is dying because that is dying. What have we done to make the virus manifest in this world?

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As I think about my brother passing away alone, I still feel a lot of pain and hurt. For the last four years I haven't gone back to visit my family in the UK. I had been planning to return there to be reunited with my family so that we could be together after being so long apart. But because of the pandemic, I have not been able to go back for a visit, and now COVID has taken my brother's life away. At first, when he was sick with the infection, my family encouraged him to try to overcome the virus. We contacted each other by phone. I sent him a message, *"Dear, dear brother, please try to overcome your sickness! I will come back and see you, and I will cook delicious vegetarian food for you! I love you very much."* My family prayed and prayed for him. But in the end, he could not overcome the virus. My family was in so much pain thinking of him leaving this world in loneliness, with none of us beside him, not even his wife and his children.

"Even though we know that life is impermanent, separation is still painful." I cried a lot the day that my brother passed away. I suffered because he died. In the Avatamsaka Sutra, the Buddha taught the bodhisattvas to look deeply into the five skandas: Form is like a bubble. Feelings are like shadows on the water. Perception is like strong sunlight. Mental formations are like the stalk of the banana tree, and consciousness is an illusion.

I knew that life is short and that our bodies are fragile, but why was I still so sad when my brother passed away? Suddenly these words arose in my mind:

"Our life is like a floating bubble, a drifting cloud

Alive in the morning and dying in the evening

It happens continuously

Loving each other so deeply, then alone

Hating each other so fiercely, then exiled

Love, hate, hate, love

Win, lose, being, non being

They keep churning.

Wandering the six realms of the way of birth and death

The ocean of suffering is full of afflicted minds.

This afternoon, the beggar stops her travels

She feels exhausted by the suffering world

She turns her boat in the opposite direction of the waterfall

Letting go of her worldly mind, she calms the ceaseless waves of suffering.”

In this poem I thought of myself as the beggar, because I could see my mind still wandering in the stream of worldly sadness and happiness. That is why I suffered so deeply with the death of my brother. That evening this insight came to me: *“This is the nature of life. This is it.”* When conditions were sufficient, my younger brother manifested. When conditions were no longer sufficient, my younger brother was transformed into another form. Looking deeply into the true nature of life, I had to face reality. I had to accept the truth. I had to practice letting go of my deep suffering, and of my regrets at not being able to see him again.

Looking at the cloud floating in the blue sky, I wondered: *“Tomorrow it may be my turn. Sooner or later. I cannot escape death.”* I remembered Thay’s teaching: *“Let us cherish the remaining days. Happiness will smile on each step.”* Let me dry my tears and cherish the remaining days. I want to live meaningfully in each moment. How many days remain for me? I don’t want to allow myself to be occupied with pain. Despite COVID-19, I want to enjoy the wonderful beings spread in front of my eyes and do not want to let fear and worries obscure their beauty. I want to cherish each step I take on the earth. I walk for my brother. I walk for those who have been killed by COVID’s attack. I aspire to cherish every breath, and to be aware that I am still alive. I aspire to cherish the presence of my

beloved ones who are still alive, to cherish those who are around me, those who I can listen to, can see and can touch.

I would like to suggest to you that: Please say loving words to someone you love. Don't be miserly with loving words for your parents, your children, your sweetheart, and those you love. Otherwise, in the future you will have regrets. When our beloved ones passes away we will regret that we didn't say loving words to them while they were still alive. Fortunately, before my brother died I was able to say loving words to him. When I had accepted my brother's death, the pain in my heart gradually transformed. I didn't feel any regret.

My brother has two sons. The eldest is twenty-two years old and is a high school teacher. The youngest one is seventeen and is in the eleventh grade. He is a teenager with a lot of dreams about the future. My brother was a bus driver. He left home for work early every morning. He worked hard and wished that he could give his sons a full and happy life. He taught his children not to drink or smoke, not to be giddy, to study hard. He would reward them by traveling to other countries. They are very nice boys, and they always listened to their father's advice.

When I visited them I saw that my nephews were not going anywhere, and they worked very hard. I recommended that my brother should bring the boys to visit to another country for a holiday, to have a break from working. In this way, the boys could learn the culture of a different country, at the same time they are there for each other. But my brother shook his head and said: *"Thank you my dear sister. I want to wait a few more years."*

How many of us have waited for a good opportunity to do something for ourselves and for those we love? But death will certainly never wait for anyone. Even a king or an omniscient being cannot avoid impermanence. When it comes, we can't bargain. I feel permeated with the words, *"Don't miss our appointment with life."* Life is appearing in front of my eyes. If I don't take advantage right now, I may lose my opportunity.

The day my nephew had an examination to move up to grade twelve; he passed with a grade of A. He handed the certificate to his mother, hugged her, and he cried a lot. He said he was so sad that his father was not here when he got the A. But certainly his father would have been proud of his youngest son who is such a good student. As a result of his father's death, he decided to study medicine. In the future he wants to help many people to get rid of their diseases. My brother is being continued in the form of his two children.

Ignore COVID-19

I was walking on the new walking meditation path that has been discovered by the brothers. The path is lined with tall trees whose red and yellow leaves alternate beautifully. The autumn colors were so beautiful! A sudden wind blew the leaves and they flew everywhere! I stopped walking and with amazement looked at the scene in front of my eyes. So beautiful! The leaves were flying across the forest like the flowers from heaven spreading down to the earth. In fact, I have never seen such beautiful flowers from heaven! I could just imagine them and I thought that they must be just as beautiful.

Suddenly I realized that my life is no different than a leaf's life. The leaf has gone through the transitions: at the beginning was green, then gradually it's color turned a deeper dark-green, and when it comes to the end of its life, it became very bright before turning. And then it turned to a dark-brown, and finally to a withered color. Coming back to reality, I continued to step on the dry yellow leaves and thought: before returning to the Motherland, they have a chance to fly freely in space. How beautiful! I wondered, *Can I be like an autumn leaf! Can I be free and not as troubled, can I be as untroubled as the leaves before I return to the Motherland?*

In the fall, when storms hit the southern part of the United States, the eastern part is also affected a lot. Last fall, strong winds blew down an apple tree at our Monastery. It seemed that the apple tree knew it would die before winter, so in the spring it produced a lot of beautiful flowers. And this fall the flowers became many beautiful and delicious fruits. The tree also knew how to donate all that is beautiful and delicious before leaving. Whenever I would go back to the nunnery and pass by the apple tree, I would stand under the low branches, reach for a ripe red apple, and bite each piece of the apple to enjoy the sweet and sour taste. I would enjoy each bite of the apple with much gratitude for its beautiful fruit.

All phenomena are impermanent.

In 2020 because of the pandemic, we only had one retreat, an online cooking retreat. Although the retreat lasted three days, the students were very happy to attend. The retreatants missed being at Blue Cliff monastery very much. Seeing us online, they were very happy. We usually have a retreat at the end of the year. But this year, the monastic brothers went to Deer Park for their winter retreat, with

only the sisters left behind, so we didn't have enough manpower to take care of an online holiday retreat. We just organized Days of Mindfulness during special holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year and Tet. Yet we received letters from all over, from friends from Canada to Northern California. They asked us: "*What do you need? Food or anything else?*" The nearby sangha also sent letters and emails with donations and inquired about our health. Reading all these letters and emails, we were very touched. When the government began to let states communicate with each other, there was young Vietnamese couple from Delaware named Ky and Ha who often attended our Vietnamese retreats. They didn't mind driving long distances to bring a truck full of Asian food for us every month. Sometimes we would hear a car stopping in front of our dining hall. We would come out and would see a barrel of kale, two small bags of tangerines, a few boxes of almond milk, and a young man sitting in the car watching us. He would wave and laugh, and then drive away. Whenever I join my palms and read the five contemplations before each meal, I feel boundless gratitude. With every breath, and with every step, I not only pray for the peace of the world, but I also pray for the sangha, and for the safety and happiness of those people who are helping us.

Because of the COVID isolation, the teachers who teach the Sisters English must teach on zoom. They are members of the Order Of Interbeing, they are Thay's students and they have volunteered to teach us. Some of them are retired people, some work from home, or in a factory. Although we have not held any retreats, we have been busy with the classes. The English teachers are also nourished by the Sisters' freshness and their enthusiasm. I am very happy to see that the Sisters are working hard at their studies and practices. The diligence of the Sisters has nurtured me a lot. I remember one time Thay told me, "*As an older sister, you should be an example for your younger Sisters. Don't miss your schedule.*" I joined my palms and said, "*Yes, dear Thay.*"

I don't want to miss the activities of the sangha, even if the weather is cold, or if I feel quite exhausted by work. For me, the time of sitting or walking meditation is precious time. I enjoy every moment of these practice. Time flies by so quickly. Impermanence doesn't wait for anyone.

Do not let the days pass by!

With only sixteen days left until the New Year, Win Grace, my Zoom English teacher said: "*Dear Sister, I think 2020 is a really muddy year. Everything is bogged down in the mud. I hope that the year 2021 will be clear and bright, like a*

lotus growing from the mud.” I was surprised to hear her words. True! 2020 was a year of fear and separation. So many people have died from the virus. The tears for losing our beloved one is like the ocean. If we always thought of and reminisced about our suffering, we would be drowned in the sea of suffering.

“All conditioned things are impermanent.

They are phenomena, subject to birth and death.

When birth and death no longer are,

The complete silencing is joy.”

Remember the Buddha’s teaching to see that all the phenomena that are happening now in the world are impermanent, so that we are no longer afraid and can accept the truth of impermanence. Accepting the truth is not about surrendering, but about letting go of the past and returning to the present moment in order to make the present better from our past experiences. People still have time to live with more awareness in their thinking, acting and consuming.

This morning I received the news that Thay has started eating again. I am so happy! I am waiting to visit Thay. I know that Thay loves Tu Hieu Temple, that Thay loves his students and that he will wait. We pray for him to be with us for a long time.