



the toe tag of tenderness

SILVIA FISCALINI felt there was something terribly wrong with the way death was approached: people avoided dealing with it at all costs. That was 23 years ago, when she was a nursing student in Switzerland. Determined to find a better way, she gravitated to hospice work in the US, was eventually able to see both her parents through peaceful deaths, and founded a residential hospice in Bern. Today she is back working in Zürich as a hospice nurse.

When I was a nursing student, patients were not informed about the imminence of death nor did anyone talk with them and their families. So people were very scared and insecure.

Nurses' and doctors' visits to the rooms of dying people were very short and impersonal. I felt strongly that this was wrong but when I asked questions I was told that I

was simply too young to understand – and too sensitive – and with the years I would become more professional and less involved personally: as if this was a goal to achieve!

It seemed to me, though, that the whole story with death was fundamentally dealt with in a wrong way. Immediately after “expiration” (the term used when someone died, just like a credit card,) the body, often still warm, was wheeled secretly to the basement into a cooling drawer, a note attached to the toe with name and date of expiration. It was a very cold and impersonal affair.

Usually people died alone because their relatives were not called soon enough and were also too scared to stay with them. I was very disappointed in my profession and questioned Western medicine and how people were cared for. I was looking for other ways of working with people.

everything begins to connect

In a series of events, everything came together for me – Dharma, psychology and the simple fact that human kindness is the best way to work with people.

After I got a master's degree in movement therapy from Naropa University [a Buddhist, non-profit, fully accredited liberal arts college in Boulder, Colorado], I began working again as a nurse, this time in a hospice-at-home service in Denver, Colorado.

I loved my job! My rebellion changed into a willingness to also see the suffering of people in the so-called “helping professions” – the lack of methods, societal support and understanding to deal with all the suffering one encounters working in those professions.

I moved to the Bay Area where I worked in another hospice-at-home service and also became a volunteer [later she was residence manager] at San Francisco Zen Hospice [story page 28]. Then I went back to Switzerland [where she was able to be with her parents in their final years before their peaceful deaths, and where, with the help of others, she started a hospice].

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struck by Dharma lightning

I was 21 when in 1979 I saw a picture of Lama Zopa Rinpoche at a friend's house and was struck by lightning! I absolutely had to meet this person! Two weeks later there was a course in Pomaia, Italy and I went – it was a very intense thing for me. I had not been interested in religion at all but wanted to change the world through politics and was very drawn towards Marxism and socialist ideas (I still am) so for me the whole religious aspect was somewhat suspicious.

It was a real dynamite experience: first I met Geshe Yeshe Tobden, then Lama Yeshe, and finally Lama Zopa. Since then, Lama Zopa has been my main teacher. Although I also love and study with teachers from other Tibetan Buddhist traditions, my main practice or refuge (if one can talk of practice in my deluded state) has been the teachings of Lama Yeshe, Lama Zopa and His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Very important too was my training at Naropa, and Trungpa Rinpoche's presence in the West. It helped me greatly to integrate Dharma into a Western laywoman's life and I am extremely grateful for his way of using what the West had to offer and bringing it into a Dharma environment. My teachers embody the teachings, which is most encouraging and inspiring! Their tolerance, love and appreciation and great sense of humor express humility behind which seems to be a limitless knowledge, wisdom and love. The spiritual support of Lama Zopa has been a light in the darkness of my mind ever since I met him, and my life has definitely become happier.

Through doing hospice work, impermanence is not an abstract concept any longer. I appreciate life – my own and that of others – much more. I feel less judgmental of others' "paths" and less fear in life. I'm very respectful of death and I know I don't have that much time to learn, so my sense of refuge has gotten stronger.

I am still somewhat rebellious. I feel that, rather than being so interested in being a "good Buddhist" or "insider-groupie," it would be best to be a truly kind person and to be compassionate and respectful to everyone, also to one's own heritage. It is quite an endeavor to live Dharma in the modern materialistic world – at least it is for me. The true essence of Dharma is beyond culture, beyond Tibetans, Gelug, etc. so it must be possible to do it here and now, in this city of bankers. That's my inspiration.


My Buddhist practice makes me more present and relaxed with the patients – it offers me many tools and methods to work with situations and people. Oftentimes, talking



doesn't help so much but if I visualize Tara or Medicine Buddha or Chenrezig above someone's head it creates a good atmosphere and it helps me deal with all the suffering and pain I do encounter. Thinking of my teachers always helps too! Usually I do this quietly in my mind; outwardly I may hold someone's hand or simply sit there. Sometimes I read or talk with them about their own beliefs and try to find something good for them to concentrate on, even if it's not religious so they feel more calm and happy. Many people have no refuge and are very scared. Rarely someone wants to meditate or say mantras but if they show interest I am very happy to say Manis with them or do a visualization or whatever "comes through."

It's a mutually beneficial relationship. The people I meet who are dying help me a lot in my Dharma practice and life. Their kindness, and also their suffering, has kept my heart open, and I am very grateful to them. I have many wonderful memories – human beings have such tremendous potential, and kindness has no limits. ☸


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