

# On Being 90

by Robert Aitken

*In June, BPF's cofounder, Robert Aitken Roshi, turned 90 years old. He delivered this teisho (dharma talk) at the Palolo Zen Center in Honolulu, Hawai'i, for the occasion. Happy birthday, Roshi!*

Thank you, everybody, for this nice party. I feel quite overwhelmed. And thank you everyone who telephoned and sent messages of congratulation. The kindness of your messages almost convinces me that those 90 years did not pass in vain.

Now, I suppose, you hope for words of wisdom. Sorry, I don't have any, beyond stuff you already know. Wotthehell, as Archie would say.

The most obvious observation I can make is the gap between what we know and what we do. We know that we come into being, hang out for a while, and then go out of being. Nothing survives. Rupert Murdoch will not survive. Bill Gates will not survive. Their organizations and institutions will not survive. You and I and everything we value are completely ephemeral. Do we act as though we know this?

The bowing mat before our altar appeared in our mail after we heard that the seamstress had died. Had we treated her as though her days were numbered? When we stop to think about it, we realize that they are numbered for everybody in this room. That is a poignant fact, and it's sad. Kanzeon holds our tears in her vase. *Namu Kanzeon Bosatsu!* Harada Daiun Roshi asked, "How old is Kanzeon?"

Our containment of all beings is the second thing we know and have difficulty putting into practice. True realization of this containment is also conducive to waves of compassion. With Walt Whitman, we are large, for we contain multitudes.

This inclusion is set forth as the Net of Indra in commentaries on the *Huayan Sutra*. Each point in the net is a jewel that perfectly reflects all other jewels. Its virtue is the network, as well as mutual inclusion. Each one of us contains all others. The Net of Indra is metaphor extraordinaire. It permeates many of the

cases of Zen Buddhism and it permeates the haiku of Basho, like this one:

*Suzumego to  
koe nakikawase  
nezumi no su  
Baby mice in their nest  
squeak in response  
to the young sparrows.*

[from *A Zen Wave: Basho's Haiku and Zen*, by Robert Aitken]

Not only baby mice and baby sparrows but all people, animals, and things are intimately interconnected, symbiotic—dissimilar organisms living together in mutual dependence. That says it all. We are, all of us, completely and absolutely dissimilar, living in complete and absolute dependence upon one another. We are a symbiotic universe, a symbiotic family of nations, a symbiotic country, state of that country, island, community, family, and even individual (for we have all kinds of creatures living in our insides).

Challenge follows challenge, and we are led to the third thing we know and easily forget: the infinitely precious quality of each individual being and thing. Great masters show the way.

When Basho was on his last pilgrimage and lay dying in the home of one of his students, he dictated the verse:

*Aki fukaki  
tonari wa nani wo  
suru hito zo  
Autumn deepens,  
Our neighbor—  
What does he do?*

[from *A Zen Wave: Basho's Haiku and Zen*, by Robert Aitken]

Literally, "What occupation-person is he?" In the deepening mood of autumn, Basho's mind turns to the person next door. Is he an artist or a carpenter or what? You might think that at such a time, he would be focused on the seriousness of his condition, or on



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"Raven"  
by Nancy Hom  
Nancy Hom is an  
artist, activist, and  
Tibetan Buddhist  
practitioner.

some unfinished matter. No, he asked about the identity of a person in his network he did not know.

Most people will be self-centered at the moment of death. That is what makes the verse so unusual. Basho was a teacher of haiku and of life itself, and he lived this way to the very end.

Where does this leave us? Maybe you do not consistently frame your attitudes and conduct with a completely enlightened consciousness, but neither do I. Even at 90, my practice continues. The same goes for anybody with a practice, down through the years. However, the true master of religion and the true master of poetry are seasoned in their practice and realization—in their understanding, and to their compassion. Remember that the first meaning of “compassion” is “suffer together.”

Reading the literature of the bodhisattva is an exercise in the irredeemable human facts of consequence. The denial of compassion and the exclusion of others are often quite benign and productive, but ultimately and inevitably they lead to war, mass imprisonment, torture, and murder. “National interest” is the false maxim used to cover such abominations. The bodhisattva is unlimited by the bounds of national interest. Her sentiment is a feature of the oldest composition in human history.

Take the Chinese poet Bo Jui, for example. Here is an excerpt of his poem, composed in 809 AD, about prisoners of war in the ongoing conflict between the Chinese and the Tartars of Turkistan:

*Their bodies were covered with the wounds of arrows, their bones stood out of their cheeks.*

*They had grown so weak they could only march a single stage a day.*

*In the morning they must satisfy hunger and thirst with neither plate nor cup.*

*At night they must lie in their dirt and rags that stank with filth.*

[from Arthur Waley, *Translations from the Chinese* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), p. 174.]

Thus we get a sense of complicated human cruelty from ancient times, and indeed Homer predated Bo Jui by some 1,200 years. His *Iliad* presents the same subjection of flesh-and-blood human beings to the forceful imperatives we see on our television screens today, of people denying humanity.

*the horses*

*Rattled the empty chariots through the files of battle,  
Longing for their noble drivers. But they on the ground  
Lay, dearer to the vultures than to their wives.*

The imperatives of human beings to deny the humane leads to widespread killing and also to walls and fences thrown up to separate people from peo-

ple—the Great Wall of China and the other walls dividing humanity that have been thrown up in the 20th and 21st centuries. One by one these walls self-destruct. As Robert Frost wrote:

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.*

Frost wrote this poem in reaction to his neighbor's declaration that “Good fences make good neighbors.” It is a shameful kind of irony that Frost is remembered as the author of the line about good fences when actually he hated the sentiment, as even a casual reading of his poem makes clear.

You might suppose by all this that it's important to realize that all things and all beings are ephemeral and empty, that a single being contains all other beings, and that each being is infinitely precious. Such truths are indeed very important, but there is more to realize. The human being who realizes the transitory nature of the self and all beings—personally, to the very bottom—understands the humane. The human dies, but the humane lives on. This ultimate kind of complementarity is the very ground of the dharma. The *Heart Sutra* boils down this truth to the basic:

*Form is no other than emptiness—  
emptiness no other than form.*

The brief *Kannon Sutra* sets forth this ultimate fact in the realm of thought:

*Thought after thought arise in the mind:  
Thought after thought are not separate from mind.*

As everybody with a modicum of conscience knows, thought after thought arises in the mind. It may not be so clear that each of these thoughts is that very mind. It is the purpose of true masters to help us to grasp the unity of our everyday mind and the mind of Kanzeon herself.

This is the great stone bridge of Zhaozhou, and my best birthday present is its full and complete realization by each of us at last.

*I dedicate this teisho gratefully to my late master, Yamada Koun Roshi. Michael Kieran, Jack Shoemaker, and Carolyn Glass helped with its composition. ❖*