



Zen Buddhism and Health Care Planning

A conversation with Joan Amaral, Guiding Teacher,
Marblehead Zen Center

1. Tell us about Zen Buddhism in regards to life and death.

The teaching of the Buddha normalizes the question of death and dying to see it as the natural course of things. You are born, you live, and you die. It's an opening to that truth, and a freeing up of energy that is used for pushing away the reality of death in trying to avoid it, as opposed to using that energy to be fully engaged in being alive.

Sometimes the topic of death can be a major taboo, a place in our lives of fear, shame, and worry, where we use considerable energy not to face the truth that death is part of a natural course for each of us. You can look at it as energy that can be taken up and used in the present moment with love and clarity, to actively care for yourself and for others as part of what it means to be alive and to have a human heart.

2. Why is health care planning life affirming?

In Zen practice we use instruments, like the ringing of a bell, to awaken us and bring us into the present moment. A Han is a wooden block that is struck with a mallet used at the Zen Center. It is meant to call you to the Zendo, a place to go meditate, to stop and go take a look; that no matter how much you have going on in your life, your body is breathing and alive and you can make contact with that blessing and that miracle. The message inscribed on the Han says, "Great is the matter of birth and death, life is fleeting gone, gone. Awake, awake each one! Do not waste this life."

Making a plan to keep yourself well all through your life, and choosing a person to make medical decisions for you so your family and community know how to best care for you, is life affirming. It helps you stay awake and be present in your life, attending to where you need help, and to not waste your life. Spiritual communities can honor people's courage to share their life stories and what they value, and as a practice, encourage each other to contemplate their choices and preferences. The process is not just an intellectual one, but an everyday practice of caring for yourself and caring for others.



3. As a Zen Priest, how do you help people connect to taking better care of themselves and others?

Many people come to the Zen Center to reconnect to their life or 'get their life back', in getting to the message of the Han. The number one challenge as a Zen Priest is opening up wide this message of being awake, and to offer each person something to be present for in their life. When you own that point of view of being awake, that life is precious, that is the energy that fills you up that you can use to connect to yourself and others in your life.

We don't see life and death as separate, but more of the 'cosmic dance' of birth and death. Be present for the dance and use your energy to not fear death, but instead to be present in your life. Making peace with your life and eventually making peace with your death is life affirming. Health care planning for yourself and planning with a loved one can help you attain that.

Program Note: Marblehead Zen Center is offering a **Death and Dying**, 8-class series in July and August. Participants will explore life experiences, receive help in making a plan and filling out documents, and be encouraged to share their plan with their family and their care providers. Read more on their website www.marbleheadzencenter.org/

Biography:

Myozen Joan Amaral moved to Marblehead, MA in 2012 from San Francisco Zen Center to serve as guiding teacher for the Marblehead Zen Center. Her interest in zazen grew out of a background in modern dance and she continues to be interested in the ways that movement and the cultivation of energy can support the practice of stillness. Joan trained at Tassajara Zen Mountain Monastery for six years. She is a graduate of the chaplaincy program at the Sati Center in Redwood City, CA. As a priest living back out in the world, her primary focus is on the dynamic relationship between formal practice and everyday, messy human life.