

Mark Unno

Opening the Heart of Great Compassion: The Path of Shin Buddhism
Week Two: “Great Compassion and the Nonduality of Life and Death”
February 12, 2022



Welcome to the second video of this series of video Dharma Talks on “Opening the Heart of Great Compassion: The Path of Shin Buddhism,” entitled “Great Compassion and the Nonduality of Life and Death.” In today’s episode, I’ll be introducing the story of Emily, a young woman who, at the age of 34, had to face her death immediately after giving birth to her daughter, Eloise. It was one of the most amazing things that I have ever seen.

I was standing in a hospital room at the University of California San Diego Medical Center at Hillcrest, and Emily, who was 34 years old, was in the last days of her life. She had just given birth to her young daughter Eloise five weeks previous. There was a nurse who brought Eloise in and placed Eloise next to Emily’s pillow. In that moment, Emily’s mother, Lynn, and Emily’s husband, Chris, moved Emily’s hands so that she could be holding Eloise because Emily was so weak that she could not move her arms herself. The very moment she did that, one of the nurses said, “Look, look. Eloise’s oxygen level has gone up to 100%.” One of the other nurses said, “Look, Emily’s heartbeat has slowed down.”

In that moment, I had witnessed the miracle of life and death. One life, Emily, 34 years old, was about to depart from this world. Another life, Eloise, was just stepping into this world. And yet in this moment of the double exposure of life and death, it is as if their hearts beat as one: Emily, the heart of a mother, Eloise, the newly beating heart of a child, completely in union in this moment of the nonduality of life and death.

The larger context of this story is that Emily was one of my former students from the time I taught at Carleton College in Minnesota before I had moved on to the University of Oregon. I had kept in touch with Emily through her time as a remarkable student, a straight-A student, *summa cum laude* at Carleton College, her travels and work in South America, where she had won a scholarship to work with women and children, to eventually marrying her wonderful, amazing husband, Chris, to the birth of their first child, Miles, and now, Eloise.

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One day, I got a phone call from Chris. He said, "Emily is very, very ill, and she wanted you to know." I said, "I can come right down and see her." He said, "No, no. Emily is undergoing chemotherapy, and she's not feeling well right now, so please wait a couple of weeks." This was in late November. He said maybe early December. I said, "That's fine." But I think it was around November 24 or 25 that I got an urgent message saying, "Emily wants to see you now." And so I took the next flight down to San Diego from Eugene, Oregon, where I live.

I arrived at the airport, and it was as if there was a pilgrimage to see Emily. People had been arriving and renting a car and then handing it off to the next person. In this case, I was fortunate that one of Emily's friends picked me up at the airport, and I arrived to see this amazing scene of Emily with her daughter Eloise.

Later in the day, it was time for Emily to go home because she had asked to die at home. Chris, her husband, said he wanted to go in the ambulance with her, so he asked me to drive his car to their home. So I got in their car, and I followed the ambulance. We arrived at their home. A hospital bed had already been set up in their home. There was Lynn, Emily's mother, Chris, and some other friends, including another student from my time at Carleton College named Claire.

I was wearing my robes just as you see now, and I said, "Let's chant together." I took up a traditional chanting from Shin Buddhism called the Juseige. But rather than give the traditional explanation of the title because Chris and Lynn had no familiarity with Shin Buddhism or really with any form of formalized Buddhist practice, I said, "The words aren't important. This chanting is in old Japanese, and even Japanese today don't understand. The main thing to understand is that the heart of each syllable of chanting, no matter what chanting we're doing, is that it is the expression, the self-expression, of the deep flow of the oneness of reality. So don't worry about the words. Just get the feeling."

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What I always try to do when I'm doing chanting, even though in some sense I'm the leader, is I try to let the gathering and the people there lead me to the feeling of entering into the chanting. In that moment, the power of Emily's love for her family and for Miles and for Eloise was overwhelming, and I could feel that power pulling us all into the chanting. As we went deeper and deeper into the chanting, tears overflowed from all our eyes. It was a profoundly sad moment. But it was a moment that was also filled with love and with great compassion.

Afterwards, I went up to Emily, right up to her ears, and I said, “Emily, I understand why you've called me here because I know there's so much more you wanted to do including unfinished business: people, friends with whom you want to have another word, loose ends that you wanted to tie up.” I knew this because Emily was such a perfectionist. That's why she was a straight-A student, summa cum laude at Carleton College. But I said, “Emily, we all have unfinished business. We all have loose ends. We all have karma. But that is what it means to be a human being. And that is why we understand others' suffering. We understand human limitations in others because we ourselves have that. You don't have to worry because Chris and Lynn will take great care of Miles and Eloise. But you, Emily, have given the greatest gift of all, and that is your mother's love to Miles and to Eloise that will never ever be forgotten.”

In that moment, I could see Emily begin to relax. Leaving Emily that day was one of the hardest things that I've ever done in my life. But it was also one of the most moving, most touching experiences that I have had. Because Emily knew that her days were numbered, she had written many letters to both Miles and Eloise. Emily was also a great poet. She became a finalist in the very first national poetry contest she even entered. So she wrote poetry for Eloise and for Miles. She made video recordings for them.

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But the most important thing is something that has no words or images that Eloise, being only five weeks old, will never ever remember, but that will nevertheless sustain her deep, deep in her body. And that is the power of Emily’s love and of great compassion that comes from her heart and from the heart of the universe herself because that is the power, the source of all reality that each of us has deep, deep within us, not in spite of but because of the bonds of compassion that are forged through the awareness of our human limitations, of our unfinished business, of the loose ends that we’re never able to quite tie up in a nice bow that we would like to do.

This suffering is what opens our hearts to the heart of the universe herself, of great compassion. And this is the meaning of chanting the six-syllable name, *namu amida butsu*. I, this foolish being, filled with blind passions, am illuminated, enveloped, dissolved into the great flow of the oneness of reality, the awakening of infinite light. When I was first ordained and became a Buddhist minister, I felt the great weight of responsibility to carry forth and teach others. But through the many decades of having been a Buddhist teacher, I know that it is all those who I’ve had an opportunity to work with and to walk the path of Buddhism, the Buddha way, who have opened their hearts and therefore opened the way for me to realize the Shin Buddhist path of great compassion.

Thank you very much.