

Chapter 9

'Dear tangerine, where did you go?' Exploring the phenomenon of death in a Buddhist-informed gestalt therapy training workshop.

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Abstract

In September 2021, the author of this chapter, a gestalt therapy professor and Zen meditator, facilitated the workshop 'Buddhist Practices and Gestalt Therapy'. One subject emerged quite organically and unplanned: Death. The author describes and reflects upon the exploration of the phenomenon of death and, in particular, how he approached this as a Buddhist-informed gestalt therapy teacher. Three main themes are identified and reflected upon: daring to explore death; looking deeply and directly at death; and dialoguing about death. While these are not simple and straightforward guidelines to follow, reflecting on them can be enriching and a resource for continued teaching practice. The chapter ends with a poem.

Keywords

gestalt therapy, zen, death, meditation, psychotherapy

Introduction

I am a professor at the Norwegian Gestalt Institute University College (NGI). I am also a lifelong meditator. While I appreciate different wisdom traditions, currently I mainly practice in the tradition of Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. Since the early days, gestalt therapists have been interested in and have practiced Zen Buddhism, including one of our founders, Fritz Perls (see for example his autobiography *Perls*, 1969). In September 2021, I facilitated a three-day workshop at NGI exploring this intersection.

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The workshop was part of a continuing education programme for gestalt therapists. One subject emerged quite organically and unplanned during these days: Death. In this chapter, I describe and reflect upon our exploration of the phenomenon of death and, in particular, how I approached this as a Buddhist-informed gestalt therapy teacher. I end with a poem (for poetic inquiry as a method, see Guttesen & Kristjánsson, 2022; Elliott, 2012; Prendergast, 2009).

Methodology and method

I am grateful to Guro Hansen Helskog, who first introduced me to ‘reflective practice research’ and invited me to contribute to this anthology.² The research and writing of the present chapter have benefited from the dialogues and workshops for anthology contributors facilitated by the editors. The overall methodology has been described in the book’s first chapter (Helskog & Weiss, 2023). Here I will focus on the particulars of how I proceeded as a researcher. In this tradition, the researcher and practitioner are often the same person. This was also the case for me.

Immediately after the workshop, I made voice recordings on my phone about what seemed important to me. Two months later, I was reading *No Death, No Fear* (Hanh, 2012) in bed one evening. For the past year or so, I have been particularly interested in death and preparing for the fact that several beings of importance to me – my parents, Thich Nhat Hanh and others – will most likely pass away soon. I had planned to start with the original reflection the next morning. That night, I thought about the workshop as a whole and what now seemed important to me. What stood out was how death had emerged and our exploration of this. What I remembered and chose to focus on was clearly influenced by my overall interest over the past year.

The next morning, I first wrote out the experience as I remembered it. I read and rewrote the text a few times. Then I listened to the voice recordings. These reflected that, even immediately after the workshop, I had been interested in, among other things, the emergence of death and our exploration of this. I did not make any major changes in the text on the basis of the recordings, only some minor changes with regards to the chronology and timing of certain events, since I trusted the recordings to be a more precise recounting of the events as they had occurred since they were closer in time.

The next research phase of ‘critical reflection’ involved reading through the text several times and identifying main themes. I paid special attention to where I had felt some tension and discomfort. I spent quite a lot of time

trying to name the key themes, write something about each, and then refine the themes more. During this phase in particular, I also benefited from the dialogues and workshops organized by the anthology editors. In the ‘theoretical reflection’, I have especially focused on literature from Buddhism and gestalt therapy but also draw on other literature about death.

Death in the workshop

From the beginning of the three-day workshop, I repeatedly tried to model as well as explicitly emphasize certain norms. Dialogue, openness and curiosity are key values in gestalt therapy and pedagogy. Similarly, in the Zen tradition, there is an emphasis on community, collective insights, the beginner’s mind and the ‘don’t know’-mind. In both traditions, direct experience is given priority over dogma or theory. The title of the workshop – ‘Buddhist Practices & Gestalt Therapy’ – reflected this. I introduced the students to certain *practices* from the Buddhist tradition, especially the tradition of Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. These included open awareness/mindfulness, walking, eating and self-compassion meditations. Then I invited them to individually and collectively reflect on their experiences with the practices, including how they related to gestalt therapy.

While meditation on death (*maranasati*) is central in the Buddhist tradition, I was not planning on including this in the three-day workshop where many students were completely new to Buddhist practices. During the workshop, however, students referred to deceased family members and death at different times. Some mentioned parents who had passed away and for whom they were still grieving. One student remembered her deceased father and felt his presence as we did walking meditation in a nearby forest. As already mentioned, I have been particularly interested in death lately. This must also have made me more attentive to it. During the first two days, I didn’t focus on it, however.

As planned, I started the third and final day by placing a bowl of tangerines in the middle of the room, with all of us sitting in a circle around it. I told a story about how some children had come with food every morning to the Buddha while he was meditating under a tree. One morning, they brought several fruits, including tangerines. I invited the students to take one tangerine each as I was telling the story. I described how the Buddha invited the children to join him in enjoying their tangerine – being aware through touch, smell, sight, sound and taste – and I invited us all to do the same. I continued recounting how the Buddha described how that the tangerine contained the entire cosmos: rainwater, sunshine, soil, a flower, a person picking it, and a person now eating it. And I invited us all to

look deeply at our tangerines. Slowly, we ate the tangerines. Without any specific, conscious plan, I left the empty bowl in the middle of our circle.

During the sharing afterwards, several mentioned that the experience had felt sacred to them and that they had felt an intense intimacy with the tangerine, life and cosmos. Then a student raised the subject of death again. She was sad and crying while sharing that her best friend was attending a parent's funeral that day. I mostly chose to listen. 'This is life,' the student said at some point. I allowed for silence, and I made my choice explicit to her and the group. What can one say, really? I wrote 'Life & death' on a blackboard. Then we went for the first break of the day.

After the break, quite spontaneously, I guided everyone in a reflective meditation:

'Dear tangerine, where did you go? Where did you come from? Were you born at some point? Can something appear out of nothing? Are you dead now? Can something become nothing? And what about us? Do we appear as something from nothing? And then turn to nothing? Doesn't everyone and everything constantly change and continue in different forms? Do we not continue in the world through our thoughts, words and actions?'

I invited everyone to write down their individual reflections. For the sharing that followed, I chose to use a fishbowl structure (see for example Wambeke, 2009). I invited those who wanted to, to sit and share in a 'fishbowl' in the middle of the circle, close to the now empty bowl. Others remained as observers in the circle outside. Students could leave and enter the fishbowl. I stayed outside and was silent. Several students in the fishbowl referred to their beliefs. Some found comfort in their childhood faiths. Several had a Christian faith. One or two spoke about a belief that everything is energy. Someone mentioned that they had been inspired in this workshop to not be too attached to their views and beliefs but open to collective insights, also asking others what their experiences and reflections had been during the meditation. A few students referred to what they had actually discovered from the tangerine meditation. One student shared that her grandmother continued through her words and actions, that she was still alive in her heart, and that they could still be in conversation. She mentioned that she had never shared this with anyone before.

During the fishbowl sharing, I noticed that some were speaking a lot about their beliefs while others engaged in a way that seemed more in line with the Zen and gestalt norms of direct experience, openness, curiosity, dialogue and community. I didn't want to have the final word and conclude by saying something at the end. I said that I had appreciated the sharing and

that I didn't want to conclude by saying anything more. But then I added that Buddhist practices invite us to see what we can discover for ourselves here and now, for example, through the tangerine meditation, rather than remaining attached to any particular belief. Then we went for a break.

During the break, I felt some unease and tension. I wondered whether I had been respectful enough of everyone's sharing. I also wondered if we should return to the subject of death after the break. It didn't feel like we had finished our exploration. But I also felt a little stressed for the first time in the workshop. It was the final day, and I wanted to return to my plan and introduce them to some more practices before we finished.

After the break, I introduced a self-compassion meditation, as I had planned prior to the workshop. First, I guided everyone in doing this as an individual meditation. I imagined that they could bring in experiences related to death here if that was what was still needed. Later, I did a demonstration of how a therapist might use the self-compassion meditation relationally with a client. A student volunteered to do this with me. She brought up her deceased father and their complicated relationship. I guided her in the self-compassion meditation. Then towards the end, I shared some of my thoughts, being clear that she could discard what I shared or choose to chew on it for a while. I suggested that perhaps what she had done now – holding certain difficulties in awareness and compassion – was something that her father hadn't been able to do, that she also did it for her father and all her ancestors, that the father and ancestors were all continuing in her and that something was now transformed for all of them, that the change that occurred here and now had effects that stretched far back into the so-called past and far into the so-called future. A few tears appeared on the student's face. She said that my words had touched her, that she imagined her father as a young person in his own family, and that she had gone from a sense of being very small and suffering to a sense of something much more spacious.

Critical and theoretical reflection

What was important in my practice as a teacher in this narrative? What was at stake? I have identified three themes that are closely tied to each other:

- a. Daring to explore death
- b. Looking deeply and directly at death
- c. Dialoguing about death

An overarching attitude is don't know-mind or cultivated uncertainty, crucial in both Buddhism and gestalt therapy (see for example the preface

in Kolmannskog, 2018). Similarly, Helskog (2021) identified epistemic humility as one of three main ethical demands in her paper on exploring death with children. I will touch upon this attitude as part of all three themes.

Daring to explore death

As teachers (and more generally, humans), we don't know what will happen during an exploration with students (or other people in general). While plans can bring a sense of control, they can also make us rigid and blind to what emerges as important here and now. I had planned to introduce certain Buddhist practices during the workshop. Exploring death was not one of them. But then death emerged. Letting go of one's plan – especially if there is strong investment and identification with it – can be experienced as a small ego death. Opening to what is new and unanticipated can be experienced as birth. To consciously do this may take some courage.

Gestalt therapy 'creates a context (particularly in its group form) for the practice of virtues such as courage [...]' (Naranjo, 2004, p. 187). Zen promises not only courage in the face of fear but that '[y]ou can break through to freedom and fearlessness [...]' (Hanh, 2002, p. 24). My experience is that courage and fearlessness come at least partly from what is central to both traditions: the cultivation of awareness and being present with what emerges, regardless of the current situation. While Zen and mindfulness meditation is concerned with 'here and now', gestalt therapy has been defined as 'meditation in an interpersonal context' (Naranjo, 2004, p. 199) and summed up as 'I and Thou, here and now' (Simkin as quoted in Kolmannskog, 2018, p. 6).

Having several years of meditation and gestalt therapy experience supported me in the workshop, especially when something unexpected emerged. Awareness gives me a sense of spaciousness. I can be like the vast sky with clouds coming and going or the vast ocean with waves coming and going. Awareness also gives me a sense of stability – a firm ground to stand on or even yield to. Prior to the workshop, my main preparation had in fact been practicing various meditations myself, including open awareness/mindfulness, which is what I was planning to introduce to the students. I made a loose plan that I adjusted as the workshop proceeded. Throughout the workshop, I was aware of, and kept letting go of, a small sense of self, the strong identification with plans and performing well. In some ways, the workshop felt like a meditation retreat where I, as the teacher, was practicing along with the students. By the third day, I also felt a high level of trust in the group. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, 'The practice of meditation is not an individual matter. We have to do it together [...]

The next Buddha may take the form of a community [...]’ (Hanh, 1994, unpaginated).

All of this enabled me to let go of my plan and explore the phenomenon of death with the students. Mostly, I enjoyed this. During the break afterwards, however, I felt some unease and tension. I returned to my plan. I wanted to perhaps regain a sense of control. This is not necessarily wrong, of course. Often in gestalt therapy training, I need to balance opening to what is emerging here and now on the one hand and getting through a curriculum and what I have planned on the other. There is no one right way to do this. I trust my awareness of the situation and what seems to be needed. However, I do wonder if part of the reason I returned to the plan in this case was because some of the exploration, in particular how it ended with the fishbowl sharing and my comment, had felt somewhat uncomfortable to me. I could perhaps have spent more time becoming aware of this, perhaps even disclosing it somehow to the students. I will return to this later under the other themes.

What happened in the workshop took courage for a reason that is more directly related to the subject as well. Death specifically is taboo for many people in contemporary Western culture (Aries, 1974). In gestalt therapy, however, death is explicitly named and explored as one of the existential pressures (Masquelier, 2007), and most gestalt therapists are familiar with some sort of exploration of this phenomenon. Still, I felt that some courage was needed, even in a group of gestalt therapists. Part of the reason may be that death can involve a range of different beliefs and experiences that feel very personal. The students had a variety of spiritual and religious backgrounds. Even existentially-oriented gestalt therapists may have beliefs about death that differ from Zen. Impermanence and change are appreciated in both traditions. Thich Nhat Hanh (2002) distinguishes, however, between the relative dimension – e.g. the wave has a beginning and end – and the ultimate dimension, where the wave is always also water and the ocean. In the ultimate dimension, there is no-death and no-birth. Meanwhile, Western existentially-oriented therapists typically stress the finality of death (Yalom, 1980; Masquelier, 2007).

Moreover, I was somewhat cautious of having this exploration in a secular institution. In her paper on death, Helskog (2021) also raises the issue of secularization, including the fear of stepping over the boundaries of what is allowed in a secular institution. In contrast to some other educational settings, however, gestalt therapy training is meant to be very experiential, exploratory and personally developing. This takes us to how I chose to explore the phenomenon of death with the students, namely through direct experience and dialogue. As will become clear in the next sections, this can also involve some fear, unease and courage, however.

Looking deeply and directly at death

According to Naranjo (200, p. 253), ‘the invitation to suspend conceptual thinking’ is one of the most important resemblances between Zen and gestalt therapy. Thich Nhat Hanh (2002, p. 16) writes, ‘Direct experience is the only way’. This had been my emphasis throughout the workshop. I also strived for this in the exploration of the phenomenon of death. But I felt a certain unease and tension about something. What does it mean to look deeply and directly at something? How can concepts help? How can they block?

In his beautiful biography of the Buddha, *Old Path White Clouds*, Thich Nhat Hanh (1992) tells a story of how the Buddha, on the morning of his awakening, shares his discovery with some children. The children had brought him fruit to eat. Buddha asks them to sit with him and have one tangerine each, encouraging them to eat the fruit with awareness. An important insight is that of emptiness, or what Thich Nhat Hanh calls ‘inter-being’: The fruit has no inherent and independent existence (or non-existence), nor do we: fruit, rainwater, air, sunlight, soil and people inter-are. In the story, the Buddha does not merely tell the children about inter-being. He invites them to explore for themselves. A teacher can point at something, but each person needs to look for themselves. Perhaps they even discover something more or different.

After the first tangerine meditation, when a student spoke of death and grief, I first chose to respond by listening and silence. This felt important, to hold the mystery of death and the reality of grief in awareness and compassion. Then, after the break, I spontaneously created a meditation for us all to do, inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh. The Zen master has very simple, poetic ways of inviting us to explore the phenomenon of death, for example, asking a cloud where it has come from and where it has gone, or inviting us to look and see the cloud continuing in the rain or even the tea we drink (Hanh, 2002). We don’t have to wait for what we think of as Death with a capital D. In the initial tangerine meditation, I had invited the students to explore the tangerine with full awareness and also look deeply to see that the tangerine was made up of non-tangerine elements such as the sunshine and rain, that everything ‘inter-is’, as Thich Nhat Hanh puts it. Afterwards, the empty bowl suggested the tangerines were gone, but were they really?

An important component of Buddhist meditation practices is *vipashyana/vipassana* (Pali/Sanskrit), to look deeply at our experience here and now to see what we can discover. An important quality is don’t know-mind. At the same time, sometimes concepts may be skillful means in the process of discovery, including concepts such as impermanence and

inter-being (Hanh, 2002). They are like the finger pointing at the moon. In the guided meditation, I introduced such concepts in the form of more or less leading questions: ‘Can something appear out of nothing?’ ‘Can something become nothing?’ ‘Doesn’t everyone and everything constantly change and continue in different forms?’ ‘Do we not continue in the world through our thoughts, words and actions?’

Often, when I teach gestalt therapy, I prefer to first invite students to experience something for themselves, then share about their experiences, and only later do I introduce concepts that may be helpful to understand the experiences. I felt a certain unease and tension related to the tangerine meditation. I had perhaps an ideal of a completely open exploration. And the tangerine meditation wasn’t. Now, with time and reflection, I feel less unease and tension. It is clearer to me that meditations and explorations may be very non-directive, such as certain open awareness/mindfulness meditations, or they may include the introduction of specific concepts and the invitation to reflect on these. The latter may not be completely open explorations, but neither are they introductions of dogma since students are invited to reflect and look for themselves. The role of concepts in Zen and gestalt therapy may be more complex than what it seems at first.

My unease and tension may also have been related to an expectation that the students would discover something quite specific through the meditation. When introducing concepts in meditation, this is part of the art, I guess: To hold these concepts very lightly and be open to what others discover. This also applies to the students, however: Some students seemed to have strong convictions and fixed concepts, hindering them from discovering something new in the meditation. Perhaps I could also have been clearer about what I wanted them to share in the fishbowl: discoveries from the tangerine meditation and reflections based on these rather than beliefs that they had from before. I continue this reflection as part of the theme of dialogue.

Dialoguing about death

The way I see it, the tangerines hadn’t disappeared into nothing. They had become part of us. Now they have somehow even contributed to this chapter. Similarly, we constantly affect and are affected by others, a truth recognized and appreciated in gestalt therapy (see for example Kolmannskog, 2018). Thus, we could say that we continue in others, and others continue in us. As Thich Nhat Hanh (2002, p. 19) clarifies, “‘To be or not to be is not the question’”. Nothing can be on its own. We inter-are. This has become something I see as true.

Sharing my view with others may take some courage. I was cautious about sharing my own views on death. But I think there was good reason for this as well. As a teacher, one holds a particular role and authority. It is not a dialogue between equals. Timing can be important to consider. When I did share some of my own views, it was at the end of the self-compassion session with a student, after she (and other students) had made some discoveries and reflections on their own. I also stressed that it might or might not make sense to her and that it was entirely up to her to discard or keep what I said. This is in line with how dialogue is practiced by gestalt therapists (and teachers) (see for example Kolmannskog, 2018, especially chapter 1).

I first let the students share their experiences and reflections using a fishbowl structure. My initial idea was that I should stay out of this and not interfere with my own views too much. Some students seemed to have had insights that are common in practices such as the one I guided – and in line with my own view: One, in particular, felt that her grandmother continued in her through the grandmother’s words and actions. Others in the fishbowl spoke about beliefs about death that they seemed to have had for a long time, at least prior to the tangerine meditation. Some asked and listened to their fellow students in line with norms of dialogue, openness and curiosity. Others seemed more concerned with their own beliefs. Listening to them, I practiced letting go of my own views and expectations and opening up to them. However, I kept feeling a certain frustration as I heard several students say, ‘I believe’, ‘my belief’, etc. On the one hand, I wanted to again emphasize direct experience and guide them towards what they had discovered here and now. At the same time, I wanted to be respectful of beliefs that seemed very personal and important to the students.

While many people, not least in multi-cultural and secular societies, are very concerned with respecting people’s different beliefs, the Buddhist approach is to be cautious and skeptical of all beliefs. According to Thich Nhat Hanh (2002, p. 11), ‘Freedom is above all else freedom from our own notions and concepts. If we get caught in our notions and concepts, we can make ourselves suffer and we can also make those we love suffer’. As already mentioned, even concepts such as inter-being are merely meant as skillful means and not absolute truths to cling to. I wonder if I was perhaps clinging a bit too much. But I also wonder if I should have confronted the students, who seemed rather fixed in their beliefs.

Later, I reflected on this in light of the tension in gestalt therapy and pedagogy between challenge and support. According to Naranjo (2004, p. 191), ‘Fritz [Perls], like the archetypal Zen master, was a wielder of the stick: he was a master of ego-reduction [...]’ Not all Zen masters are the

same, however. Thich Nhat Hanh has a very different style. And so do I. But, as I reflect elsewhere,

It may be that I—and many other current gestalt therapists—now experience a (too strong?) shift towards support, following a period where Fritz Perls and challenge and confrontation were more dominant. An integration of the polarity in gestalt therapists and the therapy is also important. According to professor in psychology and pedagogics Nevitt Sanford, learning and growth occur when a proper balance between support and challenge is struck, and the person is ready for the change. What constitutes the proper balance depends upon the particular person and the situation here and now. (Kolmannskog, 2018, p. 41)

Gestalt therapy draws on Martin Buber's work on dialogue (see for example Kolmannskog, 2018, especially chapter 1). According to Naranjo (2004, p. 270), 'Buber was particularly coherent with what could be said of Fritz, principally in regard to Buber's conception of a 'holy struggle' with the other and the responsibility of challenging.' True dialogue can involve challenge as well as support, and I may need courage to be more confrontational. But, as is so often the case, this is also a matter of being aware of the situation and what seems to be needed here and now. I could perhaps have confronted the students who shared strong beliefs about death. But someone with strongly held beliefs may not be ready to let go and be open to something else yet anyway. What I could have done, however, was make us all aware that the subject of death seems to bring up some strongly held beliefs for many of us.

Later, I have also sought to better understand the attachment to beliefs in light of literature outside the Buddhist and gestalt therapy fields. While conscious awareness of death may have several positive effects such as increased presence, gratitude and disidentification (Yalom 1980), Terror Management Theory has shown that less conscious reactions to death anxiety include self-centeredness, clinging to one's beliefs and even demonizing those who don't share your worldview (Solomon, Greenberg & Pyszynski 2015). We need to be aware of these possible dynamics not only in a group of students but also in ourselves as teachers – and more widely in society, of course.

I find it very inspiring how some Buddhist teachers have practiced 'don't know'-mind and opening up to others. Kornfield (2009, p. 372) describes the wisdom of uncertainty that he experienced with one of his teachers, the Thai meditation teacher Ajahn Chah:

When a senior western nun left the Buddhist order to become a born again Christian missionary, and then returned to the monastery to try

to convert her old friends, many were upset. “How could she do this?” Confused, they asked Ajahn Chah about her. He responded with a laugh, “Maybe she’s right.”

Similarly, I have experienced the Dalai Lama often respond, ‘I don’t know’ (see for example the preface to Kolmannskog, 2018). This is very different from clinging to our own beliefs and concepts - including Buddhist concepts – and wanting to convert someone and win a conversation.

In Indian wisdom traditions, including the Buddhist, there is a famous parable of an elephant and some blind men. There are several variations, but the essence of it is that the blind men describe the elephant in very different terms depending on what part of the elephant they are in touch with (the flat and large ear, the solid and column-like leg, etc.). None of them is right alone, but together they are closer to the truth of what the elephant is. There is a parallel to the phenomenological stance in gestalt therapy here. Yontef (1993, p. 279) speaks of ‘phenomenological ascent’, a level of awareness where one knows that there are many different, equally valid perceptions of the world and is constantly opening up to these.

While insisting on one’s own truth as absolute is wrong, it may also be wrong to not share anything at all. In the parable, each person shares their truth. As already mentioned, I did share more of my views during the self-compassion session with a student later in the day. This may also have influenced the other students, who were exploring vicariously through her. The student certainly seemed to have had the experience of her father and other ancestors being alive in her still, even when the relationship with the father was a difficult one. The insights I shared could be a finger pointing towards the moon for some of them. And I remain interested in what other fingers point at. The cosmos is vaster than I can imagine, after all.

(Not) the end

In this chapter, I have explored how death emerged, and I chose to explore it during a gestalt therapy training workshop. I identified three main themes of importance: Daring to explore death; looking deeply and directly at death; and dialoguing about death. I have started wondering if these apply more generally to any situation when a difficult subject arises in a group. They may certainly be of some relevance. My focus has remained on death, however, and I trust that this specific subject was of some importance to the themes.

These themes are not simple and straightforward guidelines to follow. I could at times feel a certain tension, stress or unease in my body and

mind. It may have been related to the balance of holding on and letting go, of sticking to a plan and being with what is emerging, of sharing my insights and letting the students explore for themselves, of balancing support and challenge, and more. Reflecting upon my choices and teaching practice has enriched me and will hopefully be a resource for both myself and readers in our continued teaching practice.

There is little actual exploration of the phenomenon of death in contemporary Western culture, so my experience with the students was that there was a hunger to explore and even to get some answers. At times, I felt that there might be a conflict and tension between wanting me, as the teacher and Buddhist ‘expert’, to give some answers on the one hand and their attachment to certain personal beliefs about death on the other. I also wonder if there was an expectation to somehow finish and conclude about death. I don’t think we can and should conclude anything certain. Perhaps I could have made this clearer as well and supported us all better in being with the discomfort of wanting to know and not fully knowing.

The wave has a beginning and an end. The workshop had an end. I wanted the students to get as much out of it as possible. That we can finish something once and for all is an illusion, however. An illusion that can be strong in gestalt therapy as well with its focus on finishing ‘unfinished business’ (see chapter 1 in Kolmannskog, 2018). When I remember that waves can affect each other (so-called ‘interference’ in physics), that the energy continues as heat and sound and in other forms when a wave breaks, that each wave is also water and the ocean, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, and that the ocean is vast and mysterious, I can let go and trust that the workshop was enough. We have limited time, and we have eternity.

While working on this chapter, several beings who are dear to me seemed to have ‘passed away’, including Thich Nhat Hanh, fondly known among students as Thay. I end this chapter with a poem that I wrote the day after the Zen master ‘passed away’.

Dear Thay

I wanted to see you
 Like others who had seen you
 In Plum Village,
 Be in your presence,
 Meet you in person as we say,
 But that spring I was supposed to come,
 I don’t know if you know,

My mother-in-law passed away,
And I stayed with her son.

Then I realised
We were meeting
In a different, very powerful way:

You entered me in bed
As I read your words of love and wisdom,
Your poetry.
You walked through me in the pine forest
As my feet peacefully touched the ground.
A kiss you called it, the intimate meeting of foot and ground.
You were inside me and all around in the Oslo Sangha
As we practiced as one.

Now they say Thich Nhat Hanh has passed away.
I sit down and look at the plum tree in my garden,
Bare,
Covered by snow.
I'm pretty sure it will bloom again in spring,
But I don't know,
A silent Sunday
In winter Norway.

A tear forms in one eye,
But then immediately also a smile.
Hi,
I recognise you.
I remember how you said the cloud never dies
But falls down as snow and rain,
Rests as a lake,
Is the water in my sweet chai.
I recognise you,
A small teardrop in one eye.
Everything will fall,
Everything will rise,
Nothing really dies.

I look at a photo of you smiling.
Then I put it away.

I see you smiling in my mind,
 Here and now, inside,
 And then:
 A smile on this face,
 What I call mine,
 No inside, no outside.
 Who are you? Who am I?
 Just smiling.

I say thank you to myself.
 I say thank you, Vikram.
 I say thank you, Thay.

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