

## REJUVENATION: THE LEGACY OF A BODHISATTVA

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*With the sudden death of his wife, Iain Coggins gains a new perspective on life. 'I felt her life pass into mine and into all of us, filling the room like a dissipating mist,' he recalls. 'Within me there was a profound sense of encouragement and of absolute freedom.'*

I wasn't expecting the night of Thursday, May 28, to be anything more than just another night near the end of just another week. I came home from the photocopy shop at a quarter to 11 and found the apartment empty. A note on the altar caught me by surprise: "Come to Memorial Hospital immediately — please don't worry." The note was signed by our close friend and neighbor, Corinne. With a quick glance at the apartment before I bolted out the door, I could see that some type of commotion had taken place in the room. The coffee table was shoved against the far wall, one candle had fallen from its holder on the altar.

This was the night that my old life ended and a new one began.

Katherine Satsuki Coggins was a beautiful young woman with an embracing heart who dedicated her life to helping others. A private person, she never wanted to draw attention to herself, but those she left behind have been powerfully affected by her quiet magnanimity.

Kathy, however, struggled with a low opinion of herself and what she called a "lack of self-identity." In a 1990 journal entry she writes: "I always have that feeling that 'my' life is insignificant... I don't know where that comes from... I realized a connection somehow with the way I think about myself and the way I think about the world. Separate." Shortly after writing that entry she met me, her future husband, and we embarked on a whole new journey where she would fully challenge this perception.

From beginning to end, our relationship was one of incredible joy. For seven-and-a-half years we were never apart, and we treasured every moment we had together. Not a moment was spent in vain as we lovingly supported one another in our individual struggles to develop our lives. In fact, things were so good between us that I often pondered how it could be. There was a deep and subtle sense that our time might be limited. I hated this feeling and always shoved it lower in my mind. It stimulated a dark feeling in me that life is inherently sad and that beauty and joy are only a thin veneer over an impenetrable sorrow at the heart of things.

But this feeling could not be suppressed. Kathy brought it back time and again. While we were immeasurably happy, in her own life she continued to fight to determine a direction for herself. "I don't necessarily want materialistic things," she writes, "I want my creativity to be able to surface from my life and I want to be able to draw from it."

On a physical level Kathy suffered from heart palpitations and anxiety attacks. About 10 years ago she was diagnosed with mitral valve prolapse, an abnormality in one of the heart valves that causes an occasional backflow of blood when the heart contracts. The body reacts by increasing the heart rate to compensate for the anomaly. This problem would usually occur in the middle of the night but was sporadic and unpredictable. It could happen for several nights in a row and then not again for several weeks. The palpitations were particularly pronounced during times of stress. Kathy would shoot bolt upright in bed with heart racing and the feeling that she was going to die at any moment. She would often be unable to sleep for the rest of the night or poorly at best. She lived in terror of these

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events, and her doctor could suggest little else but avoidance of stress and certain foods.

Over the course of our life together, Kathy would frequently tell me, “I don’t think I’m going to live long; my heart is too weak.” She became somewhat of a hypochondriac, constantly worrying about the source of her ailment. She would listen to health shows on the radio and read articles wondering if it was her thyroid one week, or a lack of vitamins the next. One thing Kathy deeply realized was that the condition of her body reflected the deadlock in her mind that kept her from releasing her creative potential. She chanted vigorously to reveal this part of herself and carried out SGI activities with the conviction that only by being open and encouraging to others could she discover who she really was.

Over the years she touched the lives of innumerable people. Everyone loved her kind and gentle demeanor, and she would go beyond all limits to support others in challenging their personal difficulties. She truly lived the bodhisattva ethos of taking on the problems of others as her own.

With the announcement of the pending destruction of the Grand Main Temple, her faith took a dynamic upsurge. She recognized fully the evil intent of Nikken and furthermore that the fundamental darkness Nikken is manifesting is something that we all must combat within ourselves. Once and for all she wanted to triumph over what plagued her own life: fear and stagnation. Summoning up her courage she determined to visit a cardiologist to finally get some answers about her heart. Her appointment was Thursday, May 28.

After a full battery of tests, including an echocardiogram, the doctor said, to her astonishment, that she had a perfectly healthy heart with no sign of mitral valve prolapse. Apparently the palpitations were the result of a harmless “twitch” in the heart muscle that could be controlled with medication if she so desired.

That night, before I went out to make copies, Kathy joyfully told me that she had won, that she had triumphed over the darkness in her life by having the courage to seek an answer to her greatest dilemma. I felt freer myself, seeing the weight of years lift from her shoulders. We fondly bid farewell to one another as I went out to take care of my business.

An hour or so after I left the house she had begun to feel a strange pain in her head and dizziness. Somehow, before she collapsed from a massive and inexplicable cerebral hemorrhage, she was able to call 911, open the apartment door and then call Corinne. When Corinne arrived only moments later, Kathy lay prostrate before the altar with the phone at her side. She was moaning and muttering disjointed phrases, unable to tell anyone where I was. By the time the paramedics arrived shortly thereafter, she lost all consciousness, her heart stopped and she was quickly placed on life support.

All night long, 12, sometimes more, family and friends stood chanting at Kathy’s bedside in the intensive care ward, holding vigil as she died.

She had mentioned on four or five occasions in recent months that she felt she was going to die of “something like a stroke.” None of this talk made any sense to me at the time, and I even got angry at what seemed her gloom-and-doom attitude.

“You don’t understand,” she retorted emphatically. “I just feel it, and you have to deal with that from me.” She deeply understood her destiny and had been preparing me all these years.

At 7:30 a.m., Friday, May 29, Kathy died. She had turned 35 three days earlier. I turned to those who were gathered around her and said, “Let’s recite the ‘Hoben’ and ‘Juryo’ chapters now.” In that solemn and sober ceremony I felt her life pass into mine and into all of us, filling the room like a dissipating mist. Within me there was a profound sense of encouragement and of absolute freedom.

The thought was somehow in my mind that now is the time to move forward like never before. Life from now on is going to be greater than either of us could have ever imagined.

I felt she was giving me a charge to elucidate the meaning of her early death and to reassure as many people as possible. She seemed to be saying: “You must encourage everyone! No one can be discouraged by this event!” It was Kathy’s profound determination at the moment of her enlightenment that people open their hearts to one another freely, fearing no repercussions for embracing all lives as we do our own and our loved ones.

At her incredible memorial service, this determination pervaded the room. More than 200 people attended her funeral, and letters of condolence from SGI President Ikeda and other leaders in Japan, as well as SGI-USA General Director Zaitso, among others, were read. Participants were profoundly moved by the powerful, uplifting atmosphere of the memorial. Numerous people in Santa Rosa and the North Bay have begun chanting as a result of Kathy’s death, or have rejuvenated their practices. A surge of sharing and deepening of Buddhist practice has emerged here on a scale previously unimaginable.

My wife lived her life as a Bodhisattva of the Earth, purely burning it into white ash, nothing left undone, nothing left unsaid. Nichiren Daishonin writes, “Each and every one of you should be certain deep in your hearts that sacrificing your life for the Lotus Sutra is like trading rocks for gold or filth for rice” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 176).

Moreover, President Ikeda states: “In the event that a person in your family dies a premature death, there is certainly a profound significance to this death. An early death enables a believer to lessen his karmic retribution. As common mortals we may not understand this, but from a long-range perspective, a person’s early death, in effect, will result in his being able to avoid some greater calamity in the future, for himself and for his family, and thus to produce more fortunate circumstances than would otherwise be the case. As our faith deepens, we become able to understand this mystic principle, though we naturally have a strong desire for our deceased relatives to have lived even a little longer than they actually did” (*Buddhism in Action*, vol. 6, p. 21).

The example Kathy left behind, her model of how to live with dignity and compassion, and the transformation we are all experiencing because of her, ultimately outweighs the sadness we feel.

At the moment of her passing my lesser self departed along with hers. I knew then that I would never face deadlock in my practice again. It was as if she enabled me to gain 10 or 20 years of faith all at once; my old life was gone, a new one just beginning. Therefore, in the midst of my sorrow, I feel the greatest, untold joy. This is death in Buddhism: rejuvenation. This is the legacy of a bodhisattva.

**Corinne Meadows,  
Santa Rosa, Calif.**

*Thank You, Kathy!*

*Corinne Meadows shares her story of the death of her friend.*

The winter’s rain fell from the night sky, soaking my clothes as I ran the 500 yards to my friend Kathy Coggin’s house. When I arrived, the door was ajar and Kathy was face down on the living room floor in front of her altar. The candles were still burning, and I knew that she had been chanting only moments before. I found myself kneeling on the floor beside Kathy, chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo with all my life force, despite my fear, realizing that this was indeed a crucial moment, that this was a life-or-death situation. As I continued to chant, waiting for the paramedics to arrive, Kathy reached out, grabbed my hand and squeezed it tightly two times, as she drifted into unconsciousness.

Ever since Kathy’s death, I have become much more attuned to the profound reality that

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I am indeed living, and that I often have not been truly living. Instead I have often found myself slandering my life in moments of desperation, almost unconsciously and certainly automatically, unable to recognize that my life is something to be treasured. Shortly after Kathy died I found myself again slandering my life, my inner voice screamed out “I want to die.” In that moment I became acutely aware of my lack of understanding and appreciation. I knew that I had to change and eradicate this thinking because Kathy no longer had the opportunity to be alive and I did, yet I was wasting precious time and energy. For the first time in my 12 years of practice, I caught my slander and chanted Nam-myoho-enge-kyo to cancel it.

It seems that I have always been plagued by a fear of death since my early teens. What bothered me most about death was that people and the world would go on living and functioning without me — for indeed life *does* go on.

Now I feel that living to the fullest honors Kathy’s life. She would only want me to be happy and not shrivel and dry up because of my grief. Only days ago I dreamt of SGI President and Mrs. Ikeda. In my dream President Ikeda was 35 years old, the same age as Kathy, and Mrs. Ikeda told me that I have to start to live — to *really* live — and that now is the time when my life truly begins.

I am reminded of the character Emily in Thornton Wilder’s play *Our Town*, a young woman who dies and has a moment to review her life and her town. She sees the beautiful trees and the town where she lived and says: “I didn’t realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Oh, earth, you’re too wonderful for anybody to realize you. Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? — every, every minute?”

Because I am still alive, unlike the character Emily, unlike my friend Kathy, I can appreciate every minute. Death has taken me by the hand; my eyes have been mercifully opened from their darkness to gaze upon the true wonder of life. What a rare and precious joy it is to be able to walk down McDonald Avenue and inhale the night blossoms, to feel the sun on my face, sit quietly with my cats, to chant Nam-myoho-enge-kyo.

Today I continue the struggle to discover the purpose of my life. I am thankful for Kathy because she enabled me to wake up and appreciate my life in all its simplicities and complexities. If I can hold onto this spirit, despite my struggles and especially in my darkest moments, then I can truly enjoy the wondrous nature of life. I can, as Nichiren Daishonin said: “Suffer what there is to suffer, enjoy what there is to enjoy. Regard both suffering and joy as facts of life and continue chanting Nam-myoho-enge-kyo, no matter what happens” (MW-1, 161).

Thank you, Kathy.

**WT**