



Getting the rug pulled out

By Singhashri

I'm sat in the office of the surgeon who, three weeks earlier, removed a papilloma from my right breast. I've come in for what I'm assuming will be a routine follow-up to a relatively minor operation.

The next thing I know he's telling me that, not only do I have breast cancer, but I've got two different kinds.

If you've ever wondered whether your Dharma practice is working, notice what happens during an unexpected, life-changing event. When the rug gets thoroughly pulled out from underneath you and you come up close and personal to your own mortality. When you are inadvertently pushed into the great abyss of uncertainty, with nothing to anchor you to any sense of safety or security.

The body knows

As the words fall from the doctor's mouth, I feel my whole body sinking into the chair and all my energy dropping downward. Somehow this body knows to ground into the earth. To remember the stillness there and rest in that stillness. I do not consciously think to do this, it is just what is happening.

The breath deepens. The body knows how to do this, to take in a nourishing breath and let it fill me up completely, creating space around the parts of the body that are contracting as the words literally begin to sink in. And to remind me that I am still alive. I soften.

Now energy sizzles and bubbles under the surface of my skin. As the body drops down, down into the earth, energy rises up, up towards the sky. I am fully present and aware of every little sensation in the body. Then, deep within

the fabric of this rich tapestry of sensations, my stomach turns to a ball of lead, heavy and seemingly immovable.

I know this feeling. I used to call it fear. But now it is simply sensations. I've sat here before. On long retreats I've found myself in the grip of fear and stayed with it long enough for it to lose its power over me. I've patiently attended to it, with awareness and love, and allowed something else to become possible. I've known fear to transform in the light of awareness into something exquisite and unnameable.

I remember all this in a flash accompanied by a deep trust in my capacity to hold myself in the crucible of what is unfolding.

Awareness and all that is arising within it, both "inside" and "outside" of the body, crackles and shimmers with an intense vibrancy. I am reminded, once again, that I am alive. I take another deep breath and let all these sensations flow through me. The ball of lead loosens its grip and eventually dissolves.

I become keenly aware that I have not chosen to feel any of this. What's happening now is the body's natural response to life-threatening information experienced by a mind trained to attend to whatever is arising with curiosity and love.

This lasts for what feels like eternity, but is probably only a few seconds.

Attending to thoughts and emotions

Then come the thoughts, one after the other. Firstly, the realisation that for 25 years I have been patiently waiting for this moment. That I am not at all surprised. How could it be any other way? I am 42 years old and being diagnosed with breast cancer. The same age my mother was when she had cancer, and one year younger than her when she died. This is a fate I've lived in the shadow of my whole adult life. How could it be any other way?

There is a sense of inevitability and also an awareness that this is true of every other moment of life. Everything that has ever happened, is happening, or will happen is exactly as it is. There is no other way it could be. Just this. As it is.

Then come the emotions, and surprisingly, they are not what I would expect. Without clinging to fear, there is only a deep love thrumming at the centre of my heart. A love of this life and this being who is living through it. A love for my partner sitting across from me, looking utterly devastated. Love for my mother, and an intense empathy for her in her own moment of finding out she had cancer.

Love for my father, and the pain of his loss. My loss. Our loss. Love for this doctor, who has already cared for me and continues to care. Who has probably delivered this news to people every day of his working life. Love for all the other people on the planet who have ever been in this exact same situation.

Grief now, occupying the heart space alongside love and humming at the same frequency. Grief for all that I've ever lost and might still lose. Love and grief. So strong it feels my heart might jump right out of my throat and onto the floor.

Then comes the clarity. I am aware of all these sensations, thoughts and emotions, and they are arising and passing in this broad, open, boundless awareness. And the awareness is receiving it all, deeply sensitive to it all, just as it is.

I begin to ask questions that seem to come from some other part of me. A brain that is processing the information and straightforwardly identifying what is still missing and a mouth and throat that know how to form words and create sounds.

How was it found? How big are the tumours? Are the two different cancers related? Has it spread? What stage is it at? Will I need further surgery? What will the side effects be? What is my prognosis?

The doctor kindly answers all my questions one by one. We are two people having a calm conversation about my cancer. Which is what I have now. I have cancer. The more I say it to myself, the more the body responds. More sinking, more energy, more tingling sensations stretching from deep inside the body all the way out to the edges of the skin. More tightening and loosening in the belly. More grounding, more breathing.

Discerning what is actually going on

In the days that follow my diagnosis I curiously explore my direct experience as fully as I can. Part of me can't believe that I'm not freaking out. I keep waiting for the freak out to happen. And it keeps not happening. I wonder if I am deeply flawed, unable to truly take in the gravity of the situation, cut off from myself. I wonder if I am falling victim to the oft mentioned phenomenon common among Buddhist practitioners – spiritual bypassing. [\[2\]](#)

But every time I look, all I can find is an all-pervading sense of ok-ness. This is not to say that nothing is happening. For example, within awareness I perceive energetic fluttering's tending towards thoughts and emotions that feel deeply familiar. Their voices whisper, "Shouldn't we be getting worried now?" and "I'd like to be feeling sorry for myself now..." and "Who is to blame?" and "What did I do to deserve this?".

But strangely, none of them stick or take hold of me. Instead, they simply arise and pass away in awareness. Everything is ok, or as my teacher often reminds me, "it's all good!"

The best way to describe what's left in the wake of the arising and passing is poignancy. A poignancy swelling with compassion. Yet, the feeling is not locatable to just me and my situation. Instead, it feels universal.

In dependence upon suffering arises faith

This is what the Buddha meant when he said life is suffering, impermanent and insubstantial. I am now having a real life, 360-degree reminder of this truth. But in the wake of twenty years of dharma practice, of training the mind to return to direct experience over and over again, something else has become possible.

The word that keeps coming to mind is “fruition”. Without having to make any effort in the present moment (and dependent upon a whole lot of effort put in over the years) I can rest back, with faith, in the fruits of my practice.

In one of his descriptions of how awakening happens, the Buddha taught that we suffer when we react to experience by either rejecting it or wishing for a different one. The shorthand for this is “clinging”. And when we no longer cling, something else becomes possible.

When we're able to attend with right view to the inevitable difficulty that comes with living a human life, faith arises. And with the arising of faith we step out onto a new path. One brimming with possibility.

P.S. In early September I had further surgery. The surgeon successfully removed all the remaining cancer in my right breast and it has not spread. I await three weeks of radiotherapy in November and will be undergoing genetic testing in the new year.