It's Your Choice: An Interview with Nagy

This interview with Daniel "Nagy" Buckley was conducted in the living room of his home a few weeks before his last surgery and will be published in the Zen Center's upcoming newsletter, The Water Wheel (WW). Nagy looked forward to giving a Dharma talk about how he used his Buddhist practice to navigate his health challenges. Since it was not possible to come to the Zen Center, Deb Faith-Mind Thoresen and Burt Wetanson went to him. The following is a short except from their afternoon together.

WW: Nagy, you just turned 80 and over the years, and more recently, you've had a number of health challenges, including several surgeries on your knee.



NAGY: I've been laid up since January, almost a year. In fact, I spent a birthday in the hospital. When I had the original surgery of knee replacement, I got an infection which really laid me out. I recently had the fifth surgery on my knee. Now I'm recuperating and starting rehab.

WW: You've said that your Buddhist practice has really helped you cope with the pain and keep your spirits up. That your Zen training really works for you. How do you explain that?

NAGY: The thing that I've learned in following the Dharma is a statement I read once which said, "Pain we'll always have, but suffering is optional." That's always been my way of handling this. It really struck home – I have a choice. I could sit here and moan and groan. The thing is that it's my choice if I suffer.

Maybe it's hard to explain, but we all have choices. My mother was a nurse for over 30 years, and the one thing she taught me is how to be a good patient, and I'll tell you, that has really paid off. Let's say a nurse or somebody comes in and has to do something. What I try to do is project this upbeat, okay feeling, and that in turn affects the other person. So it works out well for both of us. It's not such a big ordeal.

Another important thing – Roshi Egyoku and I were talking about this – it's so important, and you do not see much of it. How often do we laugh, not only at the situation but at ourselves? Don't take yourself too seriously. You've got to bring some humor into it because that's such an important part of being alive. You're not the only one who's ever had something like what I have. I'm glad I had this experience because it shows that Buddhism really seems to work.

You know, when you study the life of the Buddha, here's this man, he's eighty-some years old, and he's dying. It's his Parinirvana. And there's a big crowd of people around him and they say, "Oh, what are we going to do? The Master's dying!" And what is he doing? He's teaching. He's telling people, "I've found something that works for me, and I try to teach it to you. But if it doesn't work for you, find something that does. Be a lamp unto yourself!" He's saying, "Hey, you've got the power. Do it!" There's that wonderful saying – Do not desire what the teachers have. Seek what they sought. That saying really breaks it down for you. You have the final decision about what you want to follow.

WW: But something happens – physical or psychological pain – and you feel trapped. Do you personally consciously make a decision to take your pain another way, or is it your natural way?

NAGY: That's a good question. I think it's half and half. I sometimes say – well, it's your choice, buddy. I could be so miserable with this and wondering will I ever be able to get back to normal. But what good does it do me to worry about something that I can't really do anything about right now. Just learn to live in the moment and kind of enjoy what you've got. Some people don't do that. They like to hang on.

WW: People who cling to pain or suffering are kind of saying to life, "You're awful!"

NAGY: That's right. Absolutely. It vindicates them or it justifies them. It's an excuse to condemn whatever has come to them. Which makes them maybe even more miserable.

WW: So you choose not to suffer?

NAGY: That's right. You have to deal with the reality of what it is. Again, the whole thing of choice. What would

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happen if you hang on to it? What good is it doing you? As opposed to trying to let go of it.

You know, I do prison work in California and one of my favorite practice stories is – we used to give each woman an ordinary Q-tip. One day, a new woman showed up from another prison and oh, she was tough. She could have whipped everybody physically She was angry one time and she said later, "I don't know what this place is about. I was so mad at this woman, I could've killed her! I didn't care what they did to me. But all of a sudden, I was surrounded by women waving Q-tips at me." So what was the meaning of giving all the women cue-tips? What does it stand for? Quit Taking It Personally!

WW: How do you relate that to letting go in the present moment?

NAGY: How do I relate it to practice? There's a wonderful story. A guy lives next door to a monastery, and every morning, he takes his dog out for a walk. And he'd look in the gate of the monastery and he'd say, "What do they do in there?!" Then one day, one of the monks is outside working near the gate, so he goes up to the monk and says, "Excuse me, sir, I don't mean to bother you. Could I ask you a question?"

And the monk says, "Oh yeah, we see you every morning walking your dog. What's your question?" And the man says, "What do you do in there?" And the monk starts laughing, and he says, "We fall down, we get up, we fall down, we get up…." That's what it is. A lot of people don't want to get back up. Or they may not have whatever helps you to get up. A toolbox. Maybe they don't even know you can get back up.

Getting back to my situation, I think you could tell from my tone that I feel pretty upbeat, happy, and whatever happens, happens. Sometimes I think, this Buddhism seems to work – if you use it.











