

A Lotus for You, a Buddha to-Be
August 8, 2011

Every other Thursday at around 11:30 am, if I happen to be in my church office, and not driving from one appointment to another, I have the good fortune of being witness to a group of Wildflowers gathering in the church conference room to practice Buddhist meditation. Helen Burnette is usually the first one there, and she arranges the table with a very simple altar--perhaps a nice cloth, a sprig of flowers, a simple chalice, and a small figurine--and then she welcomes the others as they come in from their busy lives to sit, study, and meditate together. For the next hour and a half, as I sit in my office next door, answering and sending emails, writing whatever it is I'm needing to write, I hear voices greet, laugh, ponder, and then, with seamless transition, all goes quiet. I get lost in my work once more, and then, just as seamlessly, just as gently, there are voices again, and laughter, and then I hear the door to the conference room open, the voices become clearer, and those who came in an hour and a half earlier leave smiling and looking peaceful.

I know this last part because often I step out into the hallway to say hello to people as they leave. It's a lovely sight to behold. There's nothing radical, as far as I know, in the time that these people have spent together.

Still, the stillness they have welcomed into their lives, the silence, the breathing, the just being, seems transformative. Yes, that's speculation on my part, since I'm not actually participating in the group. But if *you're* curious to experience silence, breathing, and being, I invite you to reach out to Helen Burnette or others members of the group, and see if you might join them. The Wildflower sangha, as Buddhist communities are called, is small, but like a lotus, it holds ample space for reflection, kindness, and compassion.

In *this* world, which, rather than circling around the sun, too often seems to be careening through the tumult of political and ideological animosities, in this world, we need such a slowing down time as the Buddhist group creates for themselves. To slow down not only our physical activities, go, go, going, but also to slow down our very minds, our very hearts. I mean, have you ever stopped and watched just how fast your mind is thinking, how speedily or dramatically your heart is feeling? And it's not like they're doing their thing on a nice two-lane country road. No, they're doing it on the freeways of Los Angeles--taking every exit, getting on every entry ramp, getting lost in Burbank when they meant to go to Long Beach.

See for yourselves. For a moment, in a moment, I'm going to invite us to close our eyes, or lower them, and be silent together. As we move into and through silence, pay attention: Is it hard to keep your eyes closed or lowered, because you think you might miss out on something someone else is doing on the other side of the room? Does your mind get really busy at the mere *suggestion* of closing or lowering your eyes, because you might feel too vulnerable, or submissive in that way? Just pay attention. For these moments of silence, pay attention *not* to what is *out here*--a baby crying, someone unintentionally beginning to doze, papers shuffling. Pay attention to what is *in there*, in you--in your mind, in your heart. Whatever you witness, inside or out, can you just watch it arise, linger, and go by? Let us try. I will invite the bell to sound now, and when the time of silence comes to an end.

(5 minutes SILENCE)

Welcome back. How was that? Did your mind take you for a ride? How was your heart? Did feelings rise and fall and rise again? And of course your body--bones and muscles, aches and twitches, clenched teeth. So much happening, and we were silent together for a whole five minutes. Imagine

what might happen if you were to sit still and observe and witness and greet and let go of thoughts and feelings for several hours? Or days? The Buddha only became the Buddha--the awakened one--after doing just that. Like Jesus, who went out into the wilderness and resisted demons and temptations for forty days, the Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree through cravings and aversions, diversions and distractions, until finally he came to a place of complete peace, of clarity, of awakeness.

Only by sitting with himself, breathing in, breathing out, breathing in, breathing out, was the Buddha able to clear away the clutter. Or let me take that back one step. Only by sitting with himself, breathing in, breathing out, breathing in, breathing out, was the Buddha able to take *notice* of the clutter. And then, noticing it, and neither pushing it away nor grabbing at it, he allowed the clutter--the *suffering*, really--to dissipate on its own.

It's as Fear says to the young warrior in Pema Chodron's story we heard Jan read from earlier. Fear says to the warrior, "My weapons are that I talk fast, and I get very close to your face. Then you get completely unnerved, and you do whatever I say. If you don't do what I tell you, I have no power. You can listen to me, and you can respect me. But if you don't do what I say, I have no power."

Now, I'll verbalize the obvious, and point out that some fears, such as fear of a truck coming directly at us at high speed, are worth listening to. Fear, in its origins, was a tool for survival. And I suppose one could say it still and always is a tool for survival. The question becomes, surviving what? And how?

I happened to catch an episode of the television hospital drama, *House*, the other night, in which one of the characters, a patient, was a hoarder. Hoarding, it seemed to the patient and her husband, was her way of surviving in the world. But as the doctors did their detective work, literally excavating her home, they discovered some baby clothes in the farthest reaches of her bedroom closet. The woman, it turns out, had had several miscarriages, had not told her husband for fear of disappointing him, and was literally burying the pain of having lost the chance several times over to be a mother.

So, whether we hoard things in our homes, or in our minds and hearts, so often all that clutter functions primarily to bury the source of our pain, when really what we need to do is air our pain, see it, greet it, make peace with it, free it, let it go. True, just as fear can talk fast and get in our faces, pain, when revealed, might scream and cry. But, to paraphrase Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, "the ocean of compassion is greater than

the ocean of pain.” Really, I think he uses the word suffering. The ocean of compassion is greater than the ocean of suffering.

Now, that might seem like quite a claim, compassion being bigger than suffering, if we once more look around at our careening world. The ocean of compassion is bigger than the ocean of economic crisis in this country? The ocean of compassion is bigger than the ocean of the famine in Somalia? The ocean of compassion is bigger than the deaths of those 31 American troops this weekend? Bigger than the horrific attacks in Norway in July? Really? Yes. Really.

But here’s the thing. Just as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that “Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability,” compassion doesn’t just happen magically. It takes insight. It takes effort. It takes action. As Sharon Salzberg’s teacher says to her after she tells him about her frightening rickshaw ride, in which a drunken man had tried to attack her, as her teacher says, “Oh, Sharon, with all the lovingkindness in your heart, you should have taken your umbrella and hit that man over the head with it!”

Similarly, we must understand, in Salzberg’s words, that compassion “is the strength that arises out of seeing the true nature of suffering in the world. Compassion,” says Salzberg, allows us to bear witness to that

suffering, whether it is in ourselves or others, without fear; it allows us to name injustice without hesitation, to act strongly, with all the skill at our disposal.”

No, compassion doesn't roll in on the wheels on inevitability, especially if, in this free-market, reality show ridden, race-to-the-top world we live in, we were never *taught* compassion. It takes, in Salzberg's words, learning to “see the *true* nature of suffering in the world.” It takes developing the *skill* to truly bear witness. But just as Jesus admonished, “first take the log out of your own eye and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye,” so must we understand that if we do not have compassion for ourselves, if we do not truly see the nature of our own suffering, our vision of the world will be too muddled to truly see the suffering of others.

Thich Nhat Hanh puts it this way, in his book, *A Guide to Walking Meditation*: “Worry and sorrow cling to our lives, and we want to let them go. How shall we do this? Take firm, calm steps. Take courageous steps. Be alert,” he says, “alert to your burdens of worry and sorrow.... Ask yourself, ‘Why should I wish to keep this weight on my shoulders?’” Thich Nhat Hanh then emphasizes, “Be clear that you are indeed carrying the heavy luggage of worry and sorrow, and be compassionate with yourself.

You can experience compassion for others only when you are compassionate with yourself.”

Part of Wildflower Church’s mission statement is that we commit to transforming ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love, and social justice. It’s groups like the Buddhist meditation group, and others, that offer us room, space, and breath, for that transformation.

Buddhist sanghas are also such places where transformation is offered. Thich Nhat Hanh, who is Vietnamese, has worked for decades with American Vietnam veterans, helping them to heal from their experiences of the war. Similarly, Pema Chodron, who was born Jewish, talks in her book, *When Things Fall Apart*, about a trip to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. There she came to the painful realization it wasn’t just “those people over there” who were responsible for the deaths of millions of Jews, but that American and British immigration policies were, in her words, “collusive with the Nazi regime.” She concludes from this experience, “The things we do, or fail to do, don’t just disappear, but reverberate out through the vast web of our interconnectedness. This understanding,” she says, is not about taking on the burden of guilt; it is about the realization that whatever each one of us does matters. Wisdom arising from clear seeing

recognizes that we are all connected to one another, that no one stands alone...” Chodron writes. “Compassion transforms that vision into motivation to act for the sake of others.”

So if a cynic says *to* you, or from *within* you, “You think you can transform yourself and the world around you through acts of compassion, love, and social justice. Whatever. Don’t hold your breath,” say back to that cynic, “Exactly. I *don’t* hold my breath. I let it move through me. And riding on my breath is my own suffering, and the more I bear witness to the waves of my breath, the more those waves wash away my suffering. And when I am no longer weighed down by my suffering, the more I am able to lift my head and my heart, and see the suffering of others. So yes. As long as I am breathing, as long as I am awake, I am committed to transforming myself and the world around me through acts of compassion, love, and social justice.” Then you are welcome to bow down to that cynic, in front of you or within you, and say with all the compassion in your heart, “A lotus for you, a Buddha to be.”

Amen.

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