

April 2013

Greetings!

This is the second time we have missed a month with our emails. There are a few reasons for this. First, we have had some ill-health. Second, the email simply took longer to pull together than we thought! Third, we have a bunch of stuff going on and don't have that much time. In fact, Geoff will need to take a break from doing these emails for a while due to the amount he has going on at the moment and in the near future.

I hope folks are doing okay. I can see the winter has been rough in many places. Here in Seattle it has been a pretty normal winter – hardly any sun, very cloudy, with showers and rain. Actually this is really good weather for going inward and meditating.

Things are going well with the Seattle group. We're still very happy with the church where we meet on Monday nights. Also we have two group members with small children. So we have started a once a month children/family get together at one of their houses. These have gone very well. The format is simple – the children (and adults) do an incense offering, bows, and a short meditation. Then we read a short Buddhist children's story. It looks as if these get-togethers will be continuing as everyone seems happy with the way they are going.

I've been sitting on writing this email for about a year. I talked with Geoff about it and we decided to make it a joint effort as we felt our different perspectives may be helpful. The email then took on a life of its own. My first thought was to show how karma can work on anyone - even very talented and successful people. Then Geoff and I went into more details about our own training. Seeing what Geoff wrote about his training really helped me in understanding that particular viewpoint. He wrote about striving and the effort to be "good". These two ways of going, are not ways that I go. But actually, after reflecting on it, his perspective and mine are just different sides of the same coin.

The purpose of the email is, like other emails of ours, to show that there is a way to convert the karma. Karma is converted by our taking refuge in the Love of the Eternal. Our meditation and training help us find this Love within everything so that It can permeate our being and provide us with a refuge from suffering. This refuge is always there and we can always rely upon it.

Also, the way this email has turned out, it shows that both a monk (me) and a householder (Geoff) can train and do this. The externals of our lives (in this case, being monk or lay-person) cannot stop us doing this training if we really want to do it. Between the two of us, we have been doing this practice for a total of 46 years. These years of training have really helped us both, and in this email we would like to offer this training to all by describing some aspects of it.

Last year two very talented singers died of causes related to drug/alcohol use. Whitney Houston and Amy Winehouse were truly beautiful singers and good folk. Their deaths brought up a lot of my own stuff. Just after they died I listened to previously recorded interviews with each of them. I could feel their karma throughout these interviews. They were both big on judging themselves, and a good deal of self-doubt came through. Also, I could tell that they were just not comfortable with themselves, or with life in general. I could really feel their dis-ease.

I myself have the same kind of karma they had. I also went with strong painkillers to relieve my dis-ease. In the early 1980s I was in deep water with painkillers. I was in Miami Beach, walking on the beach in the middle of the night at about the worst point of my life. I yelled at the top of my lungs for HELP! It is said that all sincere cries for help are answered, and I really believe this. Mine was. It didn't happen overnight, it took years, but each step forward showed itself. I am very grateful, and will always try to show to others the way I found.

When Whitney and Amy died it was said that their "demons" got the better of them. I can see that when people use the word "demons" they don't really know what they are referring to. It seems to be a very nebulous term. What I have found for myself, and what the teaching tells us, is that rather than there being "demons" within, there is actually past karma looking for LOVE.

We have talked in previous emails about past karma, so I won't explain it again here. Our karma comes up in our feelings, emotions, and thoughts, and is quite consuming and believable. My karma manifested in thoughts that were along the lines - if I was a smarter person, or a more artistic person, or a more creative person, or a more handsome person then my life would work for me and my dis-ease wouldn't be there. As I started to train and meditate I started to see that this was a big delusion. One thing that helped me see the delusory nature of these thoughts was realizing that people I knew who had the things that I thought I needed, the things I thought I lacked, still suffered from the same sense of dis-ease that I had. Whitney and Amy were both very talented, creative and artistic, but clearly they were troubled by the same kind of dis-ease.

When we feel this kind of dis-ease within, there seem to be two basic ways of "going with it", of believing the thoughts the karma gives rise to. Both are examples of ways that do not work.

First, there is the type of response Geoff is more familiar with. In this case we respond to the thoughts of inadequacy by trying to prove our adequacy. How do we do this? We strive to be perfect or to excel in some way, thinking that by doing so we will somehow disprove the thoughts and then the dis-ease will disappear. Our thoughts may tell us we are not good enough. Our response is to try to be very, very good at certain things.

There are endless variations. We may try to be brilliant academically, great at sports or excel in our careers. It is very common to have this kind of response. We can see ourselves and others engaged in these efforts, which have a “driven” quality to them. The problem is that they do not work, no matter how hard we strive, no matter how much we achieve.

We should say here that there is nothing wrong with excelling in any of the areas mentioned. It is of course a really good thing to want to do one’s best. But for one who wishes to do spiritual training, the motivation for these efforts matters. If our karmically generated thoughts and feelings are driving us, then by running with them we simply keep them in place as the cover over the dis-ease, which remains hidden and unable to come up to meet the Love it so needs.

The other main type of response to thoughts and feelings of inadequacy is the one I am more familiar with. When this stuff arises within me it is extremely painful and debilitating. I feel inadequate and incomplete, and a big wave of sadness pulls in. I move into a state of despair and foginess. For most of my life when these kind of tsunamis came along I would go with big time painkillers, or with externals - entertainments, people or anything that could peel me away from this state. None of these work on the deepest level.

What I think I have in common with Geoff is that mistakes can be excruciatingly painful. After making a mistake I used to go with the karma of despair and harsh self-judgment. However, training and meditation teach us to view our mistakes as helpful – helpful in that they show us what does not work. We don’t need to judge ourselves harshly over them, we simply need to move on with our meditation and daily training, trusting that their lesson will be absorbed at a deeper level as we do so. And now, even if I do go with the karma following a mistake, I can catch myself, and through meditation and training let the Love of the Eternal flow in. As it does so, it permeates the karma, softening it and allowing me to move away from the delusional thoughts it gave rise to.

I asked Geoff if he would write down what came up for him in relation to mistakes and other aspects of this email. Here it is:

“In my life prior to training I was always aware of a knot of anxiety that was felt in the abdomen. I avoided this pain. One way of avoiding it was to get very busy with the head, the intellect. I was pretty good academically and very driven to perform as perfectly as I possibly could. I was also very motivated to find the truth, but somewhere inside I knew that if I was ever really to do that I would have to face the anxiety in the gut. One way I could summarize the years of training that I’ve done would be to say that they have allowed me to relax enough around the knot of pain and anxiety so that it has become clear exactly what the anxiety centers on, to recognize it clearly and to begin to actually meditate with it. This is a work in progress

for me. Having trained for years with this thought, I see how I can be driven by it. A great fear of making a particular kind of mistake leads me to try desperately never to make such a mistake. As well as this there seems to be a general “perfectionist” streak that applies in many areas of life including morality. I have observed myself trying very hard to be “good” and to be seen as good in the eyes of others.

As I understand it though this kind of effort can never work, as it does not address the true need. The knot of pain is looking for the Love of the Eternal, not a perfect human being. And my training so far aligns with this. The effort to not make mistakes, to be “perfect”, may provide some temporary reassurance, but in the end it only seems to further the habit of seeking a solution by these means. These efforts simply don't work. In fact the anxiety gets worse the harder one tries. What has helped is persistence in simply making my best effort to do this wonderful training - to meditate and take refuge in the Eternal in daily life. Over time there has arisen an instinctive sense that the pain and anxiety are slowly getting what they truly need - there is relief, joy and great gratitude in this.”

So, whether we predominantly go with striving or despairing, neither works. The pain beneath remains and may even have gotten more acute. At this point, in our desperation, we may turn to the “painkiller” approach that myself, Whitney and Amy tried – we use drugs or alcohol to simply numb the pain. The problem is that this simply adds another layer to the cover up. The hazy, oblivious states we create, may provide a temporary relief, but they do nothing to really address the dis-ease, as they push it further from our view.

In all the approaches we've talked of – striving, despairing, numbing - we are believing our karma. We are attempting to put right something that our karmically generated thoughts tell us is wrong. In fact, there is nothing “wrong” with us. The thoughts are not true – they are just a manifestation of “stuff” in pain which is looking for Love. We do not have to believe these thoughts. When we get these strong thoughts, emotions, and feelings we can know that they are a residue of some inherited karma or karma from this lifetime. Instead of running with the thoughts, we can meditate and train ourselves in the ways we have talked about before, and gradually allow this karma, and its residue, to be met and washed by the Love of the Eternal, and to be converted. In other words, the dis-ease is finally put to rest, by the only thing that can truly help it – the Love of the Eternal.

It is worth pointing out, as we have done in previous emails, that this work takes time. The karma can be very deep rooted, and our habitual responses can therefore be very persistent and hard to resist. Gradually though, if we stick with it, the meditation and training will work. Glimmers of light will appear and a way forward will show itself.

I would like to end off with something I read from an old teacher:

“Homage to those willing to go through the suffering that leads to the cessation of suffering”

Take Care

Best wishes

Rev Basil & Geoff.

P.S. Ian, a Seattle group member, wrote a short piece that arose out of his meditation following a recent visit to the Temple. We wanted to include it here since it shows the profundity and beauty of training.

“How wonderful when the doors of the Jade Palace open
and the light shines forth
The birds sing and the cherry blossoms bloom”