

December 2012

I would like to wish everyone a very joyous holiday season and a very happy new year. This email is a little longer than usual because Geoff had some very useful input. Thanks Geoff!

Recently something came up in my training that has always caused me a difficult time. I was watching the news about a month ago and there was this story about a teenage girl in Pakistan who was promoting school for girls. Some people with a certain attitude to such a position on this issue responded very strongly and very cruelly. She was shot in the head at close range.

This had a big effect on me. My heart hardened and I began to go into a state where I was saying to myself things like: “How can anyone do such a thing?”, “What is wrong with someone who does such an act?”, “How can someone be so heartless?”, “How can there be such a foolish attitude?”. When I go on and on like this with a “righteously indignant” attitude, I find myself becoming quite judgmental. I find myself being permeated by this hardened attitude which leads to my becoming more cynical and sarcastic.

After years of meditation and training I am now aware of myself moving in this direction. It is just like formal meditation where you observe the thought coming up, and then go back to the wall, back to the stillness (the Unborn). In this example of the news report, because of my training, I was able to observe my anger arising. That this anger arises is really not the problem. What I do with it, and where I go with it, can be a big problem. It can cause great suffering for myself and others.

How can it cause such suffering? Well, in the example above the anger triggered by the news report lead to a hardening of the heart. The hardened heart manifests as judgmentalism, cynicism and sarcasm. If this kind of response becomes habitual then these attitudes become a block to the Eternal. Its Love and Compassion cannot so easily flow through us, and our whole way of being is affected. We are no longer able to see the world as the Eternal does, with the eyes of Love. Instead, we see the world and its events in a way that is heavily influenced by these attitudes and therefore distorted. Holding on to these attitudes is suffering for us as there is an inherent tension and stress in doing so. It's also likely to be unsettling and confusing for others as we may often feel the need to convince them of our cynical point of view. And if we hold these attitudes for long enough, fuelling them over time, eventually they will result in actions that are themselves unkind and unhelpful.

In this case when the anger arose I was able to use my meditation and training. It is not so easy for me, but with meditation, bows, and incense offering I was able to soften my heart. I was able to let compassion arise for all involved. It was easy to have compassion

for the girl, but now I was able to have compassion for the person who shot the girl. I can see that this person was very deluded, and due to this strong delusion thought that they were doing the right thing. I can offer my love to them, and hope that they can change and soften their heart to the area of life that clearly so enraged them in this case. I can also have compassion for myself – acknowledging that my own heart hardened in response to this incident, but not coming down on myself with judgment, because of this. Instead, I can know that it is because of something in my own karmic past that I have this strong reaction. I can also know that my attitude of righteous indignation/self-righteousness has evolved over time from this past karma.

This righteously indignant attitude is deluded, but it can be very hard for us to see it as such. We may think, “How can it be okay not to be angry with the person who shot this girl? What they did is beyond the pale”. And we may feel that by being angry we are in some way doing something to help the situation – after all, we may think, how can it be okay to simply sit there and do nothing. And yet if we go with the anger, far from helping, we actually perpetuate the suffering. The person who shot the girl did so ultimately because of a hardened attitude. If we let the event create hard heartedness in us, then we are simply continuing the same cycle. Instead, the effort of our meditation is to soften our heart to all, whether victim or perpetrator. This breaks the cycle, stops the wheel of suffering, and so in a real sense does do something to help.

This is our training- we keep the focus inward in meditation which then naturally leads us to make an effort to do something about our own attitudes and proclivities rather than others’. Looking outwards, focusing on others’ shortcomings, perpetuates the delusion that there is somehow something wrong with the world around us. In some cases, it may be that there is something in the world around us, something practical, that we can do to help. Our training is to keep our focus on the Eternal, asking It for help, listening to Its promptings, and letting Its Love flow through us. Then what is good to do is more likely to become clear to us, and when we act from this Place we will be able to act with an attitude free from greed, hatred or delusion; we will be able to act with a pure heart that sees the Eternal in everything, and so is sympathetic to all and does not judge or condemn anyone. To act in this way is simply to do our own training, but when we do this, the results of our actions will be genuinely helpful to all.

The ability to catch myself and move away from this righteously indignant attitude has really helped me in my life, and I have a great deal of gratitude for the meditation, the Teaching and the training. Above all I have great gratitude for the Eternal, since the meditation, the Teaching and the training are all expressions of It. The Eternal is their source, just as it is the source of all true compassion, sympathy and love.

I would like to end off with a little something that I wrote in 1986 when I came out west and I was first becoming aware of this attitude. This is from the North Cascades Priory newsletter, that we had in the 1980s:

A few months ago a prayer was brought to my attention. It has greatly helped me in my training. It was found by the body of a child in Ravenbuck concentration camp.

“Oh Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted upon us; remember the fruits we have bought, thanks to this suffering – our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this, and when they come to judgment let all the fruits which we have borne be their forgiveness”

This prayer has shown me the attitude of mind that I have been trying to work on in my daily life. It has shown me that one can look up in any circumstance. That one can have compassion and sympathy in any situation. That the teaching of all-acceptance is not only a teaching but an active and feasible way of life.

Take Care

With all my Heart

Rev Basil

P.S. I just returned from a monks retreat at North Cascades Buddhist Priory. Rev Master Koshin Schomberg, the Abbot and my Transmission Master, gave a series of talks. I very much encourage folks to listen to them. They are available at:

<http://www.northcascadesbuddhistpriory.org/DharmaTalks/dharmaTalks-2012.htm>