

## *LONG BEACH MEDITATION*

### **PAIN IS INEVITABLE; SUFFERING IS OPTIONAL**

**Dharma Talk given Sunday, April 13, 2008**

**By Lois Pereira**

So the first thing I want to say is something of a disclaimer. I've been meditating for about 4 years. Most of the spiritual reading I do is written by contemporary American Buddhists, with some Thich Na Thanh and Dali Lama thrown in for good measure. Which is by means of saying that I am not an expert in any way, shape or form, but am just sharing some thoughts and ideas I've had over the years. In fact, the base of this talk was a sermon I did at the Unitarian Church a few months ago. So, I'm hoping it will also morph into a dharma talk. I'm also hoping that we'll all be able to talk, because there's no way I can keep going for a full hour. So, the name of the talk is "Pain is inevitable, Suffering is Optional" and is really based on the 4 noble truths, or at least 3 of them. And just to refresh your memory and mine, the first noble truth is that we suffer, which I always thought was painfully obvious. The second noble truth is that we cause our own suffering, which I didn't find painfully obvious at all- just painful. And the third Noble Truth is that there is an end to suffering, which is my personal favorite Noble Truth. And the fourth Noble Truth is that to end suffering all you have to do is follow the 8 fold path, which as I've studied it is very, very hard.

But I've been doing some thinking, and while I still believe that eight fold path is the way to end suffering, I also believe that fundamentally, we must experience pain in order to prevent suffering which initially sounds counter intuitive. But I

think it's very true, physically, psychologically, and ultimately spiritually.  
Unrealized pain becomes suffering.

Let me start with physical pain. About 4 weeks ago, we were out of town and I was running on a treadmill at our hotel and my knee started to hurt. But I wanted to keep running, so I did- hard for about 3 miles and ignored the pain. By the time I got to our room I could hardly walk. I barely slept that night because I was in so much pain. Then I was tired the next day and limped through the rest of our trip and still can't run. I ignored my pain and literally suffered the consequence.

We do our best to avoid our pain- we're not mindful, we don't listen to signals. We avoid pain because it doesn't feel good. I think we tend sometimes to stuff it away. I can give you a family example, which I hope for your sake is foreign to you and incomprehensible. It goes something like this: Let's say I stub my toe on something my son has left lying around. It hurts. Because it hurts, I get very angry at my son. I tell him that he is irresponsible and lazy. I don't understand why he can't just pick up after himself. I'm sick of being his personal maid. When will he learn to be responsible?

Sam, in turn yells back at me, maybe something about my being incredibly annoying. He slams out of the house. I'm not sure where he's gone. I'm worried now, as well as mad. Wally is mad at me for yelling at Sam. We argue. Our older son Ben won't even talk to me. Even the dog is mad at me. It's all just one big mess. And that is suffering. The cycle of samsara, or suffering, has begun.

But here is where mindfulness comes in. Let's say I stub my toe on the same object, same situation. It hurts. I feel the initial sting, and then a burning sensation. I note it. Tears may come to my eyes. A throbbing begins. I feel the

throbbing. I am in pain. But I am not angry. I am mindful of my pain. I may put some ice on it, to alleviate the pain. I do not deflect my pain or try to get rid of it through anger. And then I ask Sam to pick up his stuff. I tell him I stubbed my toe. He feels badly and apologizes. We both experienced pain. But we did not necessarily suffer. Notice that the Buddha never said that there was an end to pain. Just an end to suffering

It is said that suffering builds character. But what it really builds is the ability to suffer in a world built on our collective, incalculable suffering.

I've questioned this. Surely there is pain in life that undeniably leads to suffering. We live in San Pedro and I work at USC where football is an extremely big deal. And there was this kid from the local high school named Anthony D'Anelo who was the star kicker on the USC football team. This was a double whammy of pride for my teenage sons. They are huge Trojan football fans and we watch the games as a family event. and I am embarrassed to say that even when we are sitting at home and watching the games on TV we would yell out "Pedro!" every time D'anelo came up to kick. Everyone in San Pedro knew D'anelo and his family. So when he fell off the cliffs near our home, it was almost as if a family member had died.

I thought a lot about how his mother must be feeling and I thought, yes. This must be more than pain. The loss of a child absolutely must be suffering.

But then I remembered a story that I had heard about a woman who lost her son in a truly horrific way. Her teenage son had been murdered in a random gang shooting. A fourteen year old boy had killed him as part of a gang initiation rite. She attended every court session, staring at her son's murderer. During the

sentencing phase of this young man's trial the mother rose from her chair, looked the young murderer square in the eye and proclaimed, "I will kill you." The young man, a minor, was sentenced to the most restrictive juvenile facilities until he was 25.

Some time passed and the mother began to visit her son's murderer. It turns out that he had been a street child without family and had no other visitors. She brought him cigarettes and food. Over time, her visits increased, until she was visiting him every week. When the time for his release came near, she asked him if he had a place to stay. He did not and she offered him a room in her home. She helped him find a job. After about a year of this arrangement the woman called the young man into her living room. She said, "Do you remember when I stood up in court and told you that I would kill you?" she asked. "I sure do," he replied. "I will never forget that". Well, I have, haven't I? The boy who murdered my son no longer exists." And she asked if she could adopt him and if he would be her son.

When we stop seeing the separation between ourselves and others; when we recognize the suffering of others, and feel our own pain as well as theirs, we are able to transform our pains in ways that might otherwise seem unimaginable. In the words of Buddhist nun, Pema Chodron, "What you do for yourself- any gesture of kindness, any gesture of gentleness, any gesture of honesty and clear seeing toward yourself- will affect how you experience your world. In fact, it will transform how you experience the world. What you do for yourself, you're doing for others and what you do for others, you're doing for yourself."

Pema Chodron writes a lot about dealing with pain in a spiritual context. She says that "the spiritual journey is not about heaven and finally getting to a place that's really swell. In fact, that way of looking at things is what keeps us miserable.

Thinking that we can find some lasting pleasure and avoid pain is what keeps us in the hopeless cycle of samsara that goes round and round endlessly and causes us to suffer greatly.”

Our very own, Corey, once told a beautiful story that I have always loved. One day, he was walking in Long Beach and a group of bicycle riders were stopped at a cross walk. As Corey was crossing the street, one of the bicyclists spit a gigantic wad of phlegm right in front of his feet. Corey was utterly furious. He wanted to hit the guy- he wanted to deck him! How dare he be so rude and disrespectful! He was livid. And then something happened. Corey looked at the bicyclist. He saw that like him, he was middle aged. Maybe a little overweight. He saw the spitter as himself; he saw himself in the spitter. And just like Corey he was struggling. To be fit. To ride his bike. To breathe. To get by; to be alive. And suddenly not only wasn't Corey angry, but he loved this man who struggled, just like him. And you. And me.

Corey's story has multiple layers. In a sense it exemplifies the suffering we experience when there is no objectively painful stimulus, when we create our own pain and turn it to suffering. So the guy spit. He wasn't spitting at Cory. But something inside of Cory felt attacked, violated. His initial response was anger. His small, vulnerable inner sense of self was injured and all his forces were brought to bear to protect that little self. Only when Cory could put a wedge between that overwhelming feeling of attack could he recognize that the two of them were not so different after all, and experience kinship with the stranger bike rider.

But how do we practice this mindfulness, this disintegration of boundaries in our daily lives which is where most of us live. I find this very difficult. How do I let go of my attachments, my desires and aversions? How do I learn to love my adversaries and see them as myself. As I said, It ain't easy.

I work with a man named George Robinson (not his real name) and he has been really, really mean to me. He writes me nasty e-mails, demands I provide him with funds I have no control over. He belittles his subordinates, degrades the colleagues I respect and admire most, hurts my feelings and challenges my integrity and competency. Really, I'm telling you, he is not a nice guy! When George challenges me- attacks me really- I want to either withdraw or fight. I don't like George and I want him to go away! I harden in my beliefs about him- his selfishness, his lack of insight, his absolute otherness! One evening, after a particularly bad day with George, my teenaged sons facetiously offered to beat him up for me- I think they said that they would take him out for me.. And even though I meditate and read Buddhist teachings, I must say it made me feel really good- at least for the moment.!

But even here, in a rare moment of spaciousness, I can see that George suffers too. He struggles with his own insecurities. He too, suffers because he is attached to success and acclaim. So, as much as he sees me standing in his way, as much as he sees me as a separate from him, he attacks. Just as I see him as my separate attacker. And we repeat the dance of attack and retreat, victim and aggressor- over and over- until one of us changes the music. I sometimes believe that George is my greatest teacher. But I still don't like him.

We all are victims of how we see each other and ourselves. You may have heard this before, but imagine, for a moment, walking along a sidewalk with your arms full of groceries, and someone roughly bumps into you so that you fall and your

groceries are all over the ground. As you rise up from the puddle of broken eggs and tomato juice, you are ready to shout out, "You idiot! What's wrong with you? Are you blind?" But just before you can catch your breath to speak, you see that the person who bumped you is actually blind. He, too, is sprawled in the spilled groceries, and your anger vanishes in an instant, to be replaced by sympathetic concern: "Are you hurt? Can I help you up?" Our situation is like that. When we clearly realize that the source of disharmony and misery in the world is ignorance, we can open the door of wisdom and compassion. Then we are in a position to heal ourselves and others.

The Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, tells a story, that epitomizes the ability to see our enemies as ourselves. As a young man in Viet Nam during the 1940's, a group of French soldiers burst into his monastery, armed and dangerous, demanding the monks' supply of rice and food. Thich Nhat Hanh was very scared and very angry. The rice that they had worked so hard to plant and harvest would be gone. What would their community do? How would they survive? Despite his rigorous training in peace and non-violence his impulse was to fight the French, to protect his grain. And then, like Cory, a shift occurred. He noticed that one of the soldiers was his age, about 18. Skinny, tired and hungry. And scared. Just like him. He felt an incredible connection between him and the French boy. The absurdity of the conflict engulfed him. And he ceased to hate the soldiers and within him, the separation between them vanished. He learned to see his greatest enemy as his greatest teacher.

I struggle with this notion. What do I say to a victim in Darfur about suffering? That it's optional? I have no ready answer. All I do know is that, the more anger,

violence and mistrust we put into the world, the more we suffer and the more we perpetuate suffering.

It isn't a matter of suppressing negative or angry emotions. It is a fundamental, spiritual shift in perception. We stop protecting that little self from criticism, from danger, from harm. We are mindful and aware of what is happening both within us and without. We begin to recognize our own blindness and ignorance, and see that others- even our greatest adversaries- suffer as much- or more than we.

But in order to do that we must be able to accept ourselves- all of ourselves- even those secret, hidden places we despise the most. This takes incredible courage. It is the mission of the Bodhisattva warrior, the warrior who is motivated by compassion and seeks enlightenment not only for him or herself, but also for everyone. In some Buddhist traditions, this means that the Bodhisattva does not reach Nirvana until all sentient beings are enlightened. Which, for me means, not only seeing my adversaries as myself, but also acknowledging the worst of myself, the parts that delight at the fantasy of seeing George Robinson being beat up by my sons, or sometimes even wants to see him dead. In the words of Buddhist teacher Sharon Salzberg, "For a true spiritual transformation to flourish, we must see beyond [the] tendency to mental self-flagellation. Spirituality based on self-hatred becomes martyrdom. Morality born of self-hatred becomes rigid repression. Love for others without the foundation of love for ourselves becomes a loss of boundaries, co-dependency, and a painful and fruitless search for intimacy. But when we contact, our true nature, we can allow others to also find theirs."

In a sense it's about hope. There is a Buddhist saying that forgiveness is giving up all hope of a better past. But, again, as counter intuitive as it may seem, and with

all respect to Barack Obama, I believe that giving up hope is also the key to the end of suffering, and a freer, liberated future. It doesn't mean that we give up effort to make the world a better place, but simply that we cease to do battle with our pain. For it is in fighting our pain that we learn to suffer not in the pain itself. Only when we come to terms with our pain, even make friends with it, can we end the cycle of suffering.

In the end, compassion is an essentially selfish choice. For once we conclude that the basic nature of humanity is compassionate rather than aggressive, our relationship to the world around us changes immediately. Seeing others as basically compassionate instead of hostile and selfish helps us relax, trust, live at ease. It makes us happier.

And now I'd like to hear what you think.