

Dharma talk 9/7/13

Listen lightly

The Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur

Sometimes we think all days should be the same, framed by sunrises and sunsets. But it turns out they are all different. Some days we are inspired and other days we are dry. Sometimes there are winter storms, and others are hot muggy summer days. Between our moods, the weather, changing light and circumstances, and everything everyone else is doing around us, every day offers different opportunity and challenges. Much of it we have no control over. Our task is to meet the challenges and opportunities of this day, this hour, this moment.

On the Jewish calendar this day offers an unique opportunity. Today is the Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, in the middle of the ten days of awe and introspection. During these days of awe, Jews do what in AA they call a moral inventory--an examination of all the hurt we have caused ourselves and others, on purpose and by accident, and what others have done to us on purpose and accident, and raise each into consciousness. The wounds are opened and offered up with awareness. And we are met with compassion. This is the alchemy--when pain meets compassion, wisdom and understanding grow.

And on the Sabbath, today, we rest. Our only task is to let awareness be open, what is known and felt are allowed to be fully known, including our wounds. with open awareness we receptive to kindness and compassion which are already available. We allow the transformation of the pain we hold onto tightly. (Why do we hold onto our pain, clenching it, while we complain it is dominating us?) So right now, today we have an opportunity to allow something new to happen. We can let go. We can allow the cessation of ill-will so kindness can be revealed.

In the Jewish creation myth, the power of Teshuvah was put in place before the world was created. Teshuvah is a process. We become aware of how we create separation and pain, aware of the effect of our own actions. And while we are taking responsibility for what we have caused, we are met with compassion and understanding. Holding our imperfections up to the light of consciousness, we are met by the power of Teshuvah. Our pain transforms into wisdom and understanding. The cure for our suffering was put into place before the wound occurred. Our suffering, what the Buddhist call Dukkha, is anticipated. Of course we blunder and cause our lives to become painfully constricted. Of course we need to practice returning to communion with the living. And we have a path that makes this possible.

Every wisdom tradition understands this fundamental need for compassion as we take on the task of waking up to the suffering we create and the obstacles of the day.

The Buddhist have the Goddess of Compassion. Her portrait hangs in the kitchen here at the Zen center. In Buddhist mythology, she walks with us with kindness and understanding. She is present now.

We have tools that enable us to do this work when we get fixated or mesmerized by a pain we are particularly attached to. We can create a big enough container for that pain, so we can put it in perspective and understand it in a new way. I want to mention two traditional ways to do this. The first is the contemplating of our own death, and the second is to remember that we are all in this together.

On Yom Kippur, Jews can literally wear or metaphorically remember their burial shroud. The Buddhist have a practice of meditating in the charnel grounds, the cemetery meditations. What is the function of bringing the reality of our own death to mind?

Remembering our finite lives can help provide a larger perspective to whatever we are perseverating about. From the perspective of my death, and the awesome power of

that contemplation, is this thing I am ruminating about, fixated on, so important? If not, let it fall away. And if it is that important, then let us feel it fully, with compassion present. Receptive. With the awareness of my own death, is there time to waste in daydreaming or complaining? Here is this moment, this opportunity to awaken.

Standing at the edge of the infinite unknown we understand all things in a new light. We get a glimpse of the incomprehensible.

On Yom Kippur, there is the communal confession of sins. With the understanding that if I did not commit the sin, some one in the room has, and we hold the work collectively. As a Buddhist might express it, anyone's pain is everyone's pain.

On the list of sins the Jews recite each year, one that continually interests me is the sin of xenophobia, the fear of the foreign, the unknown, the other. What we call not me becomes objectified, demonized. And we can demonize anything--our physical pain, our spouses, parts of ourselves, or the person sitting next to you who is breathing too loudly. We make them other, not me.

When we remember that our pain is not unique, that it is shared with many of us in this room. We are not journeying alone. This understanding that neither pain nor bliss belongs to you or to me, is very helpful. It is the experience of the moment, and it is shared. That too is part of our communal experience. My pain, my struggle becomes our struggle. My strength, your strength becomes our strength.

We gain courage, balance of mind, not by becoming rigid, but by holding this moment lightly. The stream of our consciousness flows...chatter, then pain, then humor, then quiet...on and on...each moment unique. Compassion is present. She sits next to you, within you, with us. Drop ill-will and you will know compassion is present. To let ill-will drop away is to step into the unknown without defenses. Xenophobia...no wonder we are scared, stepping into the unknown, the foreign land. And it is good to remember at

least someone in this room has understanding and compassion for your struggle, your humanness, and wishes you well on this journey. You can be receptive to the kindness that is present within and without.

And as we step into the unknown, without our defenses, we learn that the stream flows on and on, and with practice, our awareness holds it lightly. We don't even know where the stream originates, where this idea or that feeling comes from. Again, like looking at our own death, we catch a glimpse of the incomprehensible.

And equanimity and compassion exist no matter what the content happens to be at the moment. The ground of being supports us. The incomprehensible emptiness is not a vacuum. It is full and rich, and everything exists in potential, unformed.

So here we are, sitting here. Not doing anything. Receptive. Listening just hears, there is nothing to do. Seeing just sees, not needing to create anything. Not pushing away the experience. No clinging to what is good. Open to compassion which is already present. This is the opportunity of this day. We are so fortunate.