

Dharma talk
December 10, 2022
Friends Meeting House, Pittsburgh

The Trifle and Other Concoctions

The last time we gathered for retreat was March 8, 2020, days before the seemingly endless and frightening period of Covid isolation. I spoke about equanimity, which seemed essential at the time. We talked of equanimity in relationship with the other three divine abidings: loving-kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy. And how they need each other. Or equanimity dries up, shrivels, and decays. All of this is still true. And some of us arrived here at this retreat exhausted.

So, I am returning to the topic...equanimity in times of uncertainty. Of course, uncertainty is always present and has always been present, but these days uncertainty is in our faces.

So, I did what I usually do, and I went reading, and came across this quote from Jack Kornfield about his teacher:

The trust expressed by Ajahn Chah comes whenever our consciousness rests in the eternal present. "From where I sit," he said, "nobody comes and no one goes. Resting in the middle way, there is no one who is strong or weak, young or old, no one who is born and no one who dies. This is the unconditioned. The heart is free." The ancient Zen masters call this enlightenment "the trusting mind." The Zen texts explain how to do so, "To live in Trusting Mind is to be without anxiety about non-perfection." The world is 'imperfect.' Instead of struggling to perfect the world, we rest in the uncertainty. Then we can act with compassion, and we give our best. Without attachment to the outcome, we bring fearlessness and trust to any circumstances. (Kornfield website)

That sounds right—the trusting mind is capable of living with non-perfection and can rest in uncertainty.

And in another place, Jack Kornfield writes:

Underneath all the wanting and grasping, underneath the need to understand is what we have called "the body of fear." At the root of suffering is a small heart, frightened to be here, afraid to trust the river of change, to let go in this changing world. This small unopened heart grasps and needs and struggles to control what is unpredictable and unpossessable. But we can never know what will happen. With wisdom we allow this not knowing to become a form of trust.

Wisdom is not information, but an abiding presence, an intuitive, sensing opening of the body and heart. In wisdom the body of fear drops away and our heart comes to rest. (Kornfield website)

Yes, we have a body of fear, that we can easily experience as we just sit here. At the same time, we feel all this fear we are asked to develop trust. That is a very big ask.

Larry Rosenberg writes:

We need to develop a mind that is capable of looking at things with some steadiness, so we can stay with it long enough [to learn something new]. Communing with fear stimulates an understanding that has liberating power. (Living in the Light of Death, p.83)

And resistance to uncertainty will lead to increased suffering.

Here we are as mammals with our antenna raised with the defensive purpose of being on the lookout for danger, our body of fear resonating to the times we are in, and we are asking ourselves to develop equanimity!

Who do we think we are anyway, as we run into all our resistance?

Why do I feel so uncomfortable and look for someone or something to blame. And then we hunker down in the certainty of what we believe to be true, grasping hold of it, like a life raft.

Our false sense of certainty rests on a functional delusion. We wrap ourselves up in our favorite blankie, so we don't feel the discord—the denial, the anger, the grief, and we play games on our phone, partake in any of our addictions, we can get lost in any of the hindrances. Anything to not feel what we are feeling.

We get attached to these functional delusions and become fearful of letting them go and feel what is truly present. And our experiences are usually pre-screened to conform to a fixed sense of who we are, so we can live in a seemingly predictable world.

The Buddhist call these *sanskaras*. *Sanskaras* can be translated as mental impression, or recollections, or psychological imprints. I also found another

translation that I find very accessible...they translate *sanskaras* as concoctions. We **concoct** a sense of self out of bits and pieces of experience. In meditation, we can discover ourselves in the act of **concocting** an understanding out of the usual impressions, and we run into the seemingly solid mass of our own **concoctions**. The dynamism here...the verb and the noun of it...is very useful...it is thing as well as a process. We can examine our concoctions and hold them up for examination, with interest. We can observe ourselves concocting, re-creating the same concoctions, the same view of the in the world, over and over again...and we can observe our attachment to our sense of who we are in the world as we create, as we concoct as sense of self in a seemingly predictable universe.

We can be wonderfully deluded. And that can keep us recreating our own misery. And we can observe this happening in real time on the meditation cushion.

We might complain that it is these concoctions that get in the way of equanimity. But that is not accurate. Here is an image that I find very helpful to understand their relationship.

Please indulge me and let me present the image of a trifle...that English dessert... a sweet dessert of sponge cake and fruit covered with layers of custard, jelly and cream. One layer on top of another, held in a very specific bowl. It is clear glass bowl, with straight edges and a flat bottom mounted on a sturdy glass pedestal. It is all one piece, made of clear glass.

Using this image, I begin by imagining by my own concoction. My own trifle. You are welcome to go along with me and imagine your own.

The bottom layer of my trifle sits heavily with the fact that our climate is becoming more erratic and unpredictable, and more devastating, and does not bode well for the future, for the kids and grandkids. Every time I harvest flowers, the usual scurry of earwigs is now absent from the counter as I go to prepare the flowers for vases. Each time I return to all those magnificent, familiar places I knew in my youth in California, they now appear to be desiccated. Some are already burning. There is great unease here on this bottom layer, fear and a lot of grief. The closer I get to this feeling the more I feel my heart breaking.

The next layer up for me, and I invite you to imagine your own trifle, is all the civil unrest and instability of institutions that I took for granted. There is fear of pending chaos. And I remember my Jewish grandmother's stories of the Cossacks thundering into their little Ukrainian ghetto, with weapons raised. I can hear the hoof beats resonating in my bones and am afraid for all of us. There is a timelessness to the growing hate and violence. The portents are frightening, filled with scary uncertainty. And my heart beats faster when I turn my attention here.

That, too, is a layer of my trifle.

My next layer up is all the stuff of my personal life...family and friends and love and loss and irritation and folks insisting on acting exactly like themselves. They are so annoying or hurtful or fun or loving or all of those in one interaction. Or I am lonely and abandoned. It is the strangers of good cheer. It all the stuff of daily life. It is site of my most rigid responses and most predictable outcomes. This is where I keep my whole sense of history, and the stories I tell me about myself, and everyone else. Elaborate projections. Concoctions I can repeat ad nauseum. They are such familiar and repetitive patterns that they become increasingly easier to spot over time.

All part of the trifle.

The next layer, as we move up the glass container, holds all my senses. What I hear. What I see. What I smell. What I taste. It holds the glory and the cacophony of being alive to see and hear and feel this world. It is direct sensory contact. This is where I bear witness to the beautiful and the ugly, and where determination of beauty and ugly begins. This is where I touch the outer and inner world directly, intimately. This is the moment when the concocting begins.

And the top layer of this fine trifle is the lovely and ephemeral sweet, whipped cream—the divine abidings—that continuous movement of compassion, loving kindness, and the capacity for sympathetic joy...where giving and receiving are all the same. Delicious. This makes my heart open with the flow of generosity.

All this is present now, in this moment, and attention moves up and around and through all these layers of mind, as we just sit here. All affecting us,

even if these moments lie outside of conscious awareness

Where I would like to draw your attention is to the glass bowl raised up on that sturdy base. This is the equanimity that holds all this pathos, all these concoctions, all this fear, all this pain, all this delight. And the bowl remains clear and unaffected. And we can rest in equanimity itself, neither repressing nor acting out. This fine and sturdy and clear glass container holds it all.

This of course is just a model, another concoction, another temporary truth. It masquerades as static, when the contents of the trifle are always in flux. And all the layers of my trifle contribute to a sense of this moment. The trifle is a cross section of a moment, but the glass bowl is unchanging...always eternally in the present

So here, on the meditation cushion we make room for the dynamism of all the senses. We hear and see and smell and have thoughts that come and go. We have the past surfacing into the present. We can come to understand and learn to accept the latent tendencies we all have—for greed, hatred, conceit, confusion, and doubt.

We can come to know that a rigid and predictable mind is not serving us well, and it provides only a false sense of security. Mind can be observed, and the concoctions can begin to fall apart to reveal a new softness and suppleness of a mind fully alive. Understanding impermanence begins to dissolve our attachment to concoctions which are no longer useful. And even when fear is present, we know that this, too, is temporary. We are coming to understand the inherent stability of equanimity and makes it possible to stand communing with our own fear of uncertainty. This is how we cultivate trust with wisdom. The stability of equanimity makes us able to know what we used to hide from ourselves.

Larry Rosenberg wrote:

An old monk, “who taught to a very old age, and when he was in his eighties someone asked him what it was like to be an old yogi. And he said, “Oh, I just watch senility come in. I see the memory decompose on an almost daily basis” And he roared with laughter.

Perhaps he is suggesting that there is something larger and deeper than the thinking mind, or the brain, something that can observe it all.

Many of us have had intimations of that larger mind. If you've ever had the experience of observing your thinking, you've realized that awareness is larger than the thinker. The further you get into meditation, the more you become this observer. It's as if you crawl out on a limb, observing more and more of who you are, until finally you saw the limb off. You are observation itself. Pure awareness. And that awareness is not affected by anything. It just is. Everything else is scenery. (ibid., p. 41-2)

And we learn that watching

...“attachment dissolve is like watching the stains in a cloth slowly fade away, bleached out by sunlight, until the cloth is white.” (Mindfulness with Breathing, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, p. 95).

It is not sudden shift, but very gradual. We just show up here on the cushion feeling what we feel as we feel it, with the attention anchored on the breath. And the practice will unfold. This is where we find rest and gain a heart-mind of wisdom. Our concoctions become less gripping, and we can learn we pick and choose those which lead to wholesome responses.

Wisdom becomes integrated. Equanimity becomes home.

