

2016: Anxiety, Distraction, Peace of Mind

By Rev. Master Seikai

[Later this year I hope to return to the multi-part article The Varieties of Spiritual Experience. For this issue of our newsletter, however, I have the following offering. It contains an article originally published in the November-December 2008 issue of this publication.]

The year 2016 has arrived, meaning another presidential election in the United States. Every four years the whole process gets longer and more drawn out, and seemingly more contentious; this year will undoubtedly not be an exception to this trend. In the age of electronic media, we all have access to instant information about just about everything, and the new addiction of our time is the instant gratification of access to information. That, in itself, is of course a subject for consideration, particularly in light of what Buddhism says about distractions, instant gratification, and addictions.

But rather than attempting to broach that subject in particular, I'm going to assume that anyone who reads this article knows exactly what I'm talking about, and finds the whole matter to be a fair challenge. So I'd like to address how to find peace of mind, tranquility, or equanimity—however one wishes to think about this—in the midst of another contentious upheaval in American culture.

Seven years ago, I wrote an article entitled *The Economy, The Election and The Mind*. At that time, during the fall of 2008, the financial crisis and resulting "Great Recession" were unfolding, just prior to the election of Barack Obama as president. Not much has changed since then, and given that this is so, I am including that article in its entirety within this one, as it is still relevant.

What is different this time is that the economy is not the focus of anxiety for America; instead, we have a war of words regarding how to relate to the Islamic world. We are in a mild panic over terrorism in the world, and we also have an escalating number of mass shootings, our own home-grown variety of terrorism. The rhetoric has become all the more inflammatory—thanks in no small part to the role played by Donald Trump, a Republican candidate for president—and as usual, there are two polarized factions, each holding to their paradigm and position on the matter. Regardless of which side anyone identifies with, the emotions associated tend to run deep. Religious fundamentalism, which exists in all religions but which plagues Christianity and Islam in particular, lies at the root of the problem. More about that later.

The way that Rev. Phoebe and I try to teach Buddhism is not as an escape from the world, or from problems of a personal or society-wide nature, but rather how to put the teachings of the Buddha into effect right in the midst of whatever we face in the course of a day. And so I am trying to show that the world of politics and problems is not over here, and the world of religious practice and enlightenment over there. If we really aspire to live a sane life and carry equanimity with us throughout our lives, we need to carry practice and enlightenment right into the teeth and fury of the craziness of the world.

So here is what I wrote seven years ago, just on the eve of that election, together with the financial crisis, from which we as a society have largely emerged, although even just to hold to that point of view invites more contentious debate:

The Economy, The Election and The Mind

Just as we are putting together this issue of our newsletter, there is a financial crisis in America—the worst one since the Great Depression—the presidential election is days away, and so most people are very much distracted by these concurrent events. I have a 3-step program which is the antidote to too much thinking about these things which goes as follows:

1. Breathe in and out.
2. Relax your body.
3. Relax your mind.

Pretty straightforward. It is only three steps as opposed to the universally common twelve step program for alcohol and other addictions. That is not a knock against any twelve step program, but my point is that these three steps are easy to remember, and therefore can serve us as a home base to which we can return frequently throughout the course of a day.

That is, we can return to them if we really want to, and do not see what is going on in the world as fundamentally real. To view what is going on in the world as fundamentally real is the basic problem underlying too much thinking, the financial panic, and the out-of-control idealism and emotionality of a presidential election. People get very caught up in these things—totally caught up, for many people—because we mistake the external world, the things and people in it, the events that happen, as reality.

Buddhism, however, teaches us the following:

1. This human world is subject to suffering, i.e. it is unsatisfactory.
2. All component things are subject to constant change.
3. All things are devoid of a permanent, substantive self.

This puts everything into perspective. No matter who is elected president, and no matter how brilliant and successful their programs for reviving the economy might be, there will still be suffering. We know that it will be a constant and that we cannot look to politicians for an answer to it; thus, there is little to get excited about with respect to a presidential election. Things may improve and then again they may not. We may be heading into another Great Depression, and we may not. It doesn't really matter.

Great Master Bodhidharma said: Prosperity and calamity alternate with each other—this is the nature of things. And yet we humans fool ourselves into thinking that somehow prosperity is a God-given right we have, and that if we only can regulate the stock market just right, pay down the astronomic debt of the nation a bit, we can get back to things-as-they-should-be prosperity. This is delusional thinking. Nothing lasts. Change is a constant, and should we put our hopes, our money, and our faith in things that are by nature temporary and unsatisfactory, disappointment is guaranteed.

We all have a body and we can breathe. If we don't pretty soon we'll be dead. The simplicity of this cuts right through all the silly thinking we can muster. Breathe in and out and relax your body. The human body records and reflects the tensions of the brain, and so if we go around with worry in our minds, we are going to have chronic tension in our bodies. The habit energy of this is very great, and therefore it is a discipline to learn to just breathe and relax the body. You have to sit down every day and just practice it. Hundreds and thousands of times—there is simply no substitute for it.

We all have brains and those brains are constantly taking in information from the senses and processing it, and then coming up with thoughts that relate to the sensory input. Our thinking tends to revolve around basic human drives for the achieving of security, the needs for love, comfort, food, shelter and clothing. When things threaten those basic drives, we tend to react with panic, anger, fight-or-flight impulses. But those impulses tend to betray what is truly in our best interest, which is to sit still and see what happens, be calm and wait for things to change again.

It is actually possible to relax the mind. The human mind needs relaxation and rest just like the body; it functions far better when we allow this to happen. There are hundreds of ways for relaxing the mind which people have discovered and taught, but they pretty much all have the basic common denominator which meditation practices are built upon: breathe in, relax and let go of thinking. Buddhist meditation practice adds the following very helpful piece of information: do not attempt to block thoughts from occurring in your mind; rather, learn to observe what is going on in your mind and learn to let go of it. Thoughts arise and they pass away like anything else. Within them, there is no permanent substantive reality to hold onto.

Money has no substantive reality. It has value only because we collectively assign value to it, and have decided to build an economic system on its presumed value. But at root, if we look at things as they truly are, money has no real value. It facilitates the exchanging of goods and services, and is thus useful—but as philosophers, poets, preachers and song writers have been saying since time began, it is essentially empty.

What is truly valuable? The Buddha taught that ***unshakable liberation of mind*** is the goal of practice.* With a mind that is not subject to the vicissitudes of change in the world, we can live in peace no matter where we are, and this is what we truly long for, if we were able to accurately discern what it is that would truly satisfy our deepest longings. Great Master Keizan, the 14th Century Zen Master said: “Even should there be a great fire that consumes heaven and earth at the end of an epoch of time, still my heart will be at peace and filled with angels.” That is unshakable liberation of mind.

We truly long to know the peace that comes from liberation of mind, peace and contentment that is not tied to the acquisition of changing, temporary, ephemeral things. The price to be paid for this is dear, owing to the tenacity with which we cling to the belief that the world has something for us. We easily lose perspective that this is so and return to our old belief system, belief in the acquiring of things and experiences. The process which is set in motion by deep meditation on the true nature of things is one of reawakening to the fact of our lost perspective, and reestablishing the true vision. Breathe in and out; relax your body and your mind. Let things come and go and don't get worked up by it all. Learn to dwell in the place of truth.

On a human level, the work that we do, the compassion for ourselves and others what we are able to exhibit, the ability to live an honest, upright life—these things have value also. They are the means of working towards unshakable liberation of mind. If we add a contemplative practice, a discipline of mind that enables us to refocus on what is truly important every day and thus not lose sight of what is in our own enlightened self-interest, we can move in the direction of living in peace. Compassion, which is the ability to accept things the way they are, is vitally important. There is no true spiritual awakening without compassion.

There is no spiritual awakening without the giving up of greed, anger and delusion. That is the spiritual bottom line. If we want to see that the financial panic is a panic about nothing, and that the president, no matter who ends up being the next one, cannot make our suffering go away, this is the requirement. Let go of false, delusional thinking. Breathe in and out; relax the body and the mind. Cultivate compassion for all living things and for yourself. Turn compassion inwards towards your own mind—this is the essence of what the Buddha taught.

*See *Buddhist Monastic Life*, Mohan Wijayaratna, Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 156-157. The Conclusion contains the following entry:

The Buddha told his disciples:

Monks, the aim of the religious life is not to gain material profit, nor to win veneration, nor to reach the highest morality, nor to be capable of the highest mental concentration. Monks, the ultimate end of the religious life is the unshakeable liberation of the mind. This is the essence. This is the goal. (Majjhima Nikaya I 192-197)

This release allowed the disciple to live "for the benefit of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world (Vinaya II 22). The Arahant both tasted the happiness and freedom and lived a life of religious service to others. *[end of the article from 2008.]*

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The loss of perspective is a crippling problem for American society. We have difficulty distinguishing between what is important with what is unimportant, and with what is truth versus what is false. A public figure can say anything that comes to their mind, true or blatantly false, and there no longer seems to be a standard for calling such people to account. On a visceral level, this is pretty taxing.

It means that there is in effect no longer truth or falsehood, and that in the public arena there are simply opinions competing for currency, or blind acceptance.

Propaganda is nothing new, so on one level this lack of perspective has always been a feature of human societies. It may simply be going through a phase of being exaggerated. But what is different now is the ease of access to the flood of this false information: how much of it ends up in your brain and, once it is there, what can you do with it?

My solution is to put things back into perspective as best I can: if the problem is falsehood and delusion, then practice truth and clarity. If the problem is anger and hatred, then practice lovingkindness and generosity of spirit. So in practice, I devote some time every day to offering merit, wisdom and lovingkindness to all the people currently running for president, and the people already occupying some position in government. This means that whenever I find myself in an anxious state of mind over the latest act of terrorism, the latest breakout of war violence, or the latest big lie on the part of a politician, I can stop and do something within myself which provides an antidote to the disease. This is my offering to the world.

As I mentioned earlier, religious fundamentalism lies at the root of some of the world's biggest problems at the moment. To boil it down to the essential nub, what fundamentalism does is to take religious dogma—usually cherry picked out of its broader context—and make it into a divinely-backed argument to take violent action against another group which is not part of the fundamentalist fold. In the process of doing so, religious fundamentalists lose sight of the very thing which should be the hallmark of religion: compassion towards ones fellow human beings. Without compassion, religions deteriorate very quickly into being the driving force for more violence and human strife.

As long as people lose perspective on what religion truly is, and use it for purposes diametrically opposed to the real purpose of religion—to elevate human beings and give us a framework for rising above our baser instincts—war and violence in the name of God, or a religious creed, will continue.

Similarly, in the sphere of politics, if those in power lose perspective on what the purpose of political power truly is—to benefit the lives of the masses of people in the state or nation, thus losing sight of the role of compassion in government—then you end up with what we now have, which is fighting for a political agenda at the expense of the very people whom government is meant to serve. So long as this situation continues, we will have dysfunctional government.

These two basic delusions, which of course go hand-in-hand, play out over and over in the human realm. They are the Wheel of Becoming on a grand scale, and just as the Buddha taught, the wheel just keeps spinning until people, or enough people to make a difference, stop feeding energy into its root causes. None of us have the luxury to wait for other people to make a difference: we have to be the ones who actually change ourselves, thus slowly but surely changing the whole world.

Without the fear and anxiety that currently have taken hold in America on account of acts of terrorism on the part of radical Muslims, there would be no reason to get up in arms about it. Then it would be possible to act in a way which does not perpetuate the whole cycle of violence and retaliation, which goes on *ad infinitum*. And the only way fear and anxiety can be reduced is if people take it upon themselves to do so—it is always a choice that we make. The moment of decision making might flick by very quickly, so fast that we don't really see it for what it is, but that is why it is so important to develop the mindfulness necessary to catch oneself right in that little moment of choosing fear or anxiety over letting them go. Life is full of these little moments. To walk the path of Buddhism is to recognize that such moments are the stuff of training and enlightenment; rather than being doorways into the loading dock of carrying around more internal weight, we can use them as doorways into freeing ourselves from the chronic anxiety which our society has become so adept at foisting on its members.