

The Economy, The Election & The Mind

By Rev. Master Seikai

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.