

## Shifting Gears

By Steve Murray, Lay Minister

Those of us that have driven manual shifting cars know how vital it is to learn to appropriately shift gears. When gaining speed from a light or getting on the freeway, the driver shifts up the gears from low to higher gears as the car gains speed. Failure to shift will leave the engine running at a very high rate but the car running inefficiently. Eventually there will be engine damage.

There is also the situation when slowing down or going up a hill when the driver needs to shift down from higher to lower gears. If the driver does not downshift, the engine strains under the load and will eventually stall.

Driving a manual shift car can be a metaphor for dealing with expectations and changing circumstances in everyday life. I have noticed that there are times when I have to shift gears, i.e. change my plans and my focus, lest I do damage to my body and mind. When I fail to shift gears by insisting on my plans, I suffer.

During my working years, weekdays could be quite full. I would have a plan to have my car repaired, buy gas on the way home, and get there in time to have a nice dinner with friends. Sometimes, my car was not ready after work or the traffic home was jammed, and the plan was not going to happen. Shifting gears meant calling my friends and explaining that I was delayed and could not make it for dinner. But "Steve is a dependable guy, never late." So I would pressure the car mechanic or drive impatiently home, stomach in knots and temper frayed. I learned that accepting that my plans would not work and accepting that I would have to change the sentence to "Steve is usually dependable, seldom late." When that shift is made, a great load falls off, tension eases, and a little piece of self fades.

Plans for a nice vacation are made. This one is really special – to Hawaii; it's been in the works for months. Difficult days have been made easier with the thought that soon I will be in Hawaii, on a balcony overlooking the ocean at sunset, drinking a glass of wine with my best friend in the world. Then there is illness. I get sick, a family member has a serious health problem, or a friend has family problems. Shifting gears here is made more difficult due to all those thoughts about how restful the vacation will be, how much I deserve a rest, how little time I've taken for myself, how long it's been since I got away. Yet when I pause I realize that insisting, refusing to shift gears, is even worse than accepting the disappointment of a cancelled vacation. Would I want to travel ill? How would I feel sitting on that balcony knowing a family member or friend had a serious problem and could use my support?

I have struggled for years with insomnia. For a while, I would awaken in the middle of the night with dull persistent back pain. I learned that it was nothing terrible, no spine tumor or broken ribs, just aging in the form of arthritis. The pain involved a pinched nerve, so ordinary pain medication would not stop the ache. Many nights I would be quite tired, coveting a restful night's sleep, only to awaken at one in the morning with a backache. I would roll over to one side and the other, fret about how tired I would be the next day, and lament, "Why me?" In the end, the best medicine was to shift from demanding sleep to being open to learning how to accept the new circumstance that, for a time, I would not sleep eight hours restfully. That could involve a mixture of patience with the pain, getting up and sitting, and shifting the next day's activities as much as possible to the lowest stress mix possible.

My final example involves shifting gears with my life plans. I don't remember ever planning the course of my life consciously, but I simply expected that I would find the love of my life in high school or college, or certainly by my mid-twenties. I would then marry and have several loving children. None of this happened. For many years, I kept trying to make the dream happen: I would go to social events or get fixed up with eligible females, hoping this would be the

one; I would feel bad when friends and family members married, had children, and seemed to have found the happiness that evaded me in my life. It was a lonely, sometimes depressing time in my life. Sometime in my late twenties, I began to let go of the insistence that unless I fulfilled this life plan I could never be truly happy. There was no point of enlightenment here, just a gradual noticing that I could be happy when others were in love or married or had beautiful children. This sympathetic joy was there without the shadow of "Why not me?" During this same time, I noticed that the life plans of us fallible humans were not always so great. Some people thought they were in love, but were mistaken; some marriages did not work out well; some children were very difficult to raise.

It also became clear to me that there is no best life plan. A focus on the love/marriage/children plan can block out the many other satisfying ways to live a full and joyful life. Unmarried people without a partner can travel, have a great career, join social groups, become Buddhists, volunteer to help others—the list is as large as the number of people in existence.

In matters small and large, I have found a gate to freedom and peace. It is to stay aware and open to shifting gears. To mix metaphors, I think of flowing water. When there is a rock or obstacle, water flows to the left or right; when it comes to a valley or cliff, it flows downward; when a hill arises, it backs up briefly and goes around. The water is not diminished by the obstacle, hill or valley. Its life is to flow and does not depend on a channel.