

No Consolation

Introduced by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei

One of the questions that frequently comes up for students concerns the vast suffering experienced by people world wide due to war and other causes. A student brought this up recently in an email exchange, asking why there is so much contraction and how to practise with it. I asked Roshi if I could cut and paste some quotes from his own writing into my reply. Following that, he very kindly gave his permission for these quotes to be included in a text to be posted on our Website.

The first quote is copied from the issue of the eMirror that was sent out immediately following September 11th:

At Wednesday morning's formal sitting, Anzan roshi dedicated chanting the Komyo Shingon to *being mindful of the deaths of so many and this Great Matter of birth and death.*

He has also said,

Birth and death are happening in each moment. This is always the case. Being mindful of this Great Matter of Birth and Death is not a matter of telling ourselves stories about it, but of being sensitive to the sheer vulnerability of ourselves and of all beings.

The events of Tuesday, September 11, 2001 are deeply shocking and truly terrible. But events of greater and lesser scale are always occurring every day. This is the world as it is. The states of aggression that have led to this violence occur to people in a greater or lesser scale every day. This is the world as it is. Passion, aggression, and stupidity are the three klesas, the three poisons that arise from the contraction of dividing our lives into self and other.

Our practice is to see through the contraction of self-image and release the gestures of attention that arise from it. We do this through the practice of whole-bodily mindfulness moment to moment.

The text that follows is an excerpt from an email exchange between Roshi and a student on the same subject.

Student: Since I heard that the US started air strikes on Afghanistan , a deep feeling of sadness keeps surging in bursts and waves of tears that swell up in the eyes.

Roshi: I have already wept for the millions that will die over the coming years on September 11. I wept again this afternoon. We have done the Komyo Shingon. Now I am writing to you.

Student: I don't have the tendency to be an overly emotional person and I don't have a tendency to indulge in these feelings in order to secure some solid states of feeling sad. There are just these surge of images of people scared, hiding, being bombed, kids, women, men, animals wounded, dying, screaming in distress. There are surges of tears and tightness in the stomach, in the chest, in the forehead region and behind the eyes. There is a general tension and kind of anxiousness felt throughout the bodymind. Although I know that this kind of suffering occurs every day any week in many more than just one place in the world but this is the first time that I feel very closely involved in this.

Roshi: Then you have only really known that this kind of suffering occurs at all now. It is good that you have. There have been many peace protests, peace letters and petitions going around and as usual they have hardly any effect on our democratically elected leaders. This situation is sadly inevitable. It would not be enough for the West to withdraw from its long entanglement in affairs in Middle Eastern cultures that they do not understand and have no sympathy with.

The terrorists represent the implacable hatred for the enemies of God that saints and other fanatics feel. And they are saints, they are devoted to what they feel is good, and right, and true. They are also the extreme form of the dislocation that people brought up in basically a 15th Century worldview feel as their economies continue to decline, being outstripped by almost all other developing nations. Many people of Middle Eastern nations feel as strong a hatred of the West as do the terrorists but have not dedicated their lives to acting upon it.

Here is an absurd example of how bad it really is from a news item I sent out some time ago:

“Digitally composed pictures of Osama bin Laden (news - web sites) are flying through Pakistan’s mobile phone network via SMS (short message sending) to become the most sought-after accessory in the country.” Already an icon among certain Muslim groups, bin Laden has now become a digital icon as well. “‘It was sent to me by a friend,’ said Asif Azziz as he showed the grinning picture of the man blamed for the devastating September 11 bomb attacks on New York and Washington. ‘It is cool, no?’

“The picture remains on the display of a mobile phone in a similar way to a screensaver on a desktop computer. Bin Laden’s face can be manipulated to waggle his eyebrows, move his mouth and, in one particularly graphic rendition, explode dramatically.”

In order for this “war” not to happen, everything about how everyone does every thing must change. And it will not. For a decade or so I have said that one of the best things that peoples of the West (and the East, although their histories are not so twined nor bitter) could do is to show an interest in the Middle East . I meant by this very, very simple things: hear their music, look at the beautiful trceries of their calligraphies, import their films. We have never really taken the Middle East seriously. (Except perhaps to buy a falafel or make hummus and feel virtuous because it wasn’t meat and besides we’re trying to lose weight). Any interest the West has shown at all until very recently was, for example, to translate the Qu’ran and other texts in order to inform Christian missionaries how to counter the culture of the people they were converting. Or to make possible a play in the Great Game played by Britain, Germany, and Russia even through the First World War. And since then there has been eighty years of manipulation of economies, states, and peoples (and collusion with such activities by this or that Middle Eastern state) by Western nations through the lack of knowledge and disinterest of their own people and short-sightedness of various officials.

The peoples of the Middle East are already deeply isolated. Being interested, being willing to listen to their voices, even in such simple ways, is still important and will still be important through these months and years. There will be reprisals, there will be subterfuge, there will be an ongoing war that seems to have no point at which any one can say that they have “won”.

And this is still true:

Dhammapada verses 3 - 5:

“He abused me, hit me, beat me, robbed me”; for those who brood on this, hostility isn’t stilled.

“He abused me, hit me, beat me, robbed me”; for those who do not brood on this, hostility is stilled.

Hostilities aren’t stilled through hostility no matter what. Hostilities are stilled through non-hostility alone. This is an old truth. Sadly, even peace protests tend to become angry events unless we let go of our stances. War is such a sad and awful process, the mass suffering of people is so unbearable and it is such a common occurrence in this world. It is unbearable. And it is this world as it is.

Student: Please shed some light and wisdom for me. I have very rarely felt so torn and sad.

Roshi: You might not like it. But it is true. As the Buddha pointed out over and over again: This is samsara, this is the closed cycle of conditioned experience. At best it will inevitably kill you and everyone you love. There is no other possibility. But there are much worse things possible. People not only harm each other and the world around them but kill. Deliberately. There is war, pestilence, and famine. This has always been so. As well as the millions of human lives that will be lost in these events over the coming months and years, as you have said, there are also the birds and cattle and goats and horses and dogs and cats and insects that will be killed by explosions and the famine and other hardships that will follow devastation. As well as this, it gets worse. People who make money by buying and selling money move their money here and there and industries and nations and people lose money because of it; people can no longer buy rice to make gruel for their babies. This too is very real. There is also every likelihood that no matter what anyone does now, unless everyone everywhere changes everything that they do about everything (and most of us also just vanish magically from the earth without leaving the plagues and pollution that would result from so many human bodies), all wildlife on the planet will be extinct within twenty years or so except what can live in cities and between the ploughed rows of fields such as raccoons, crows, and so on. This too is very real. And it gets worse because the list goes on.

None of this can be remedied, no matter the depths of rage and anguish and horror and sadness we might feel. You cannot fix it. I cannot fix it. We can try not to break it further. But in any case, life will go on, as it does, doing what it does: birth, eating, shitting, death. This is a very beautiful world, but it is not a safe place. It is not fair. It is not nice. And yet the nature of all beings and of each being is, and always has been, and always will be limitless luminosity, beyond birth and death and all conditions.

Realizing this freedom, embodying this, and making it available to others in every way that we can is the only thing worth doing at all. This has nothing to do with trying to make the world safe or wishing it was nice. It has to do with the continuous practice of radical questioning and the dynamic activity of releasing. So I cannot help you with your sadness except to say: Feel sad, if sadness is present. A broken heart is a reasonable thing in this world. But do not become the sadness but do not avoid it. Feel the hands, feel the feet, keep the peripheral vision open. Don’t talk to yourself. Don’t vent to others and encourage them to vent. If you are watching the news on TV, practise. If you are speaking, practise. If you are listening, practise. And follow the instructions you have been given. Sit when you can, as often as you can.

From everything that I know and what all of the Buddhas and Awakened Ancestors have known, this is the most and in fact the only important or useful thing you can ever really do: practise the Way. This is the only light and wisdom I have to offer. It is not consoling but I think you do not really want merely to be consoled.