

Integrity

Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Wednesday morning class, March 27, 2013

Awakening Joy Course on Integrity, March 27, 2013

Integrity – or virtue – is considered the foundation of all practice in the Buddhist tradition. It’s an essential portal to joy, happiness, and peace, as James talked about so beautifully. I’ll try to shed some light on how we might experience this moral compass, as we move from suffering to compassion and mindfulness, through integrity to joy, equanimity, inner peace and well-being, and how we can strengthen our embodiment and expression of integrity as a living, breathing practice.

On one of my first retreats at Spirit Rock, I remember hearing a phrase from James that really caught my attention: “Let no ripple of thought disturb this peace of mind.” I thought that meant to come to such a state of clarity through mindfulness, that no ripple of thought would disturb that peaceful openness, and I liked that notion of practice very much. But James clarified that the phrase really meant to live our lives in such a way that no behavior would cause regret or remorse that would cause a ripple. He was referring to the bliss of blamelessness.

I want to look at everyday life in such a way that no regret or remorse ripples our peace of mind through the lenses of alignment, authenticity, and aliveness.

By alignment I mean anchoring our actions and behaviors in alignment with core values, core principles so that living our lives is informed and transformed by a wise understanding of these core values and principles and would keep us from doing anything that the wise would later reprove. It also means being so committed to living by them, we choose to do what’s right even when that choices has a cost to it.

We learn our first core values, core principles, from family of origin, from culture, circumstances, period of history we live in. Don’t hit your sister, say please and thank you share your toys. All tapping into deeper wisdom of whatever wisdom traditions or spiritual traditions we grew up in. Robert Fulghum: Everything I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten: clean up your own mess and hold hands when crossing the street. We align ourselves with these first training precepts to be good according to the understanding of our family and culture.

As we mature, these precepts become internalized as an internal conscience that guides us. the conditioning of the conscious rules of our society have become the unconscious conditioned rules we live by and we get a nudge from our conscience when we violate them, are out of alignment with them, at least to wake up and pay attention: something feels “off” off center and we do what we can to get back on center.

As we mature and wake up to our responsibility to be moral and virtuous individuals, we begin to sort out – are these the values I want to continue living by? Are there higher laws or a deeper anchoring in true nature that would be more liberating from suffering, more opening to an inner freedom, inner well-being? Often we seek a truer clearer more comprehensive set of precepts to

live by than the rules we learned from the conditioning of our culture. True for many of us here tonight.

An example of this following a higher law comes from the film *A Man For All Seasons*, perhaps the premier film on integrity and conscience. Sir Thomas More was chancellor of England, a position of great power and influence, during the reign of Henry VIII. When King Henry decided to secede from the Catholic Church and form the Anglican Church so he could divorce his wife Catherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn to ensure a male heir to the throne, Sir Thomas refused to sign the Act of Supremacy accepting the Anglican Church as law in England. Because he was following his own conscience, he lost his position and income, was banished from court, eventually imprisoned and beheaded. During those events, Moore's friend the Duke of Norfolk tried to persuade him to go along with the new rules, even if he didn't believe in them, even if it meant denying his faith, "for fellow ship's sake, and More replied, "and when you are in heaven for following your conscience, and I am in hell for not following mine, will you come join me there, for fellowship's sake?"

In our efforts to come to wise understanding or wise view about integrity, and wise effort, we see that one way of looking at integrity or morality is, as Dan Siegel says, is empathy for the common good. It's a genuine experience and lived understanding of the inter-connectedness of all lives that guides us in living our lives, that moves us beyond the constrictions of our conditioning, as Rumi says, out beyond right and wrong to a field, I'll meet you there.

Three levels of examples of this kind of alignment; integrity as empathy for the common good.

1) I heard this story from a member in one of my Deepening Joy groups held in support of this Awakening Joy course: while in Whole Foods, he sees a \$10 bill on the floor; looks around but doesn't see anyone frantically looking or searching pockets; thinks briefly what he could do with that, then thinks how he would feel if he had lost \$10 bill, empathizing with himself, how he would feel if he lost the \$10, empathizing with how he imagined the person who did lose the \$10 would feel, then realizes his practice in this moment would be integrity, generosity, and he turns the \$10 bill into customer service at Whole Foods. His inner state changes immediately. He feels virtuous, the bliss of blamelessness he feels this bliss and a little pride and a lot of gratitude that he made the choice he did and then a lot of gratitude for the practice, his Buddhist practice in this case, that led him to take the action he did.

When I heard that story, I felt a flood of gratitude well up in me, because perhaps a month before I had dropped my keys, my house key and my car key, in the produce section in Whole Foods. When I realized that a minute later I went back to the produce section, but no keys; I went to customer service but no keys. I did run into a friend who gave me a ride home; I picked up the spare set of keys, returned with her to Whole Foods, I check with customer service again and someone has turned in the keys. They didn't go clicking through the parking lot until they found the car that my key opened and blithely drive off with my car.

So, even at elemental level when acting with integrity costs us a \$10 bill that no one would have known about except us, integrity and the gratitude for the bliss as we practice and learn of the examples ripples out.

2nd level: where there's more of a cost. In a previous incarnation, a friend asked me what I was giving up for Lent, and I said chocolate. She asked, why not give up your racism? A higher bar. More recently, I attended two conferences, one on compassion, one on mindfulness and compassion. Hundreds of good souls. Not one container for recycling bottles and cans and cardboard from lunch. There was a time when environmental protection was my moral passion and raising money for environmental protection through the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund was how I earned my living. So now, I still have some core principles about protecting the environment, with more spiritual practice, more consciousness about responding: Who do I call? There's a cost in time and effort. Do I write people? Organize people? There's a nudge within if I don't. Integrity naturally opens to larger field of social action.

One of my favorite stories of someone taking action, overcoming a great deal of effort and cost, is from the film *Knowledge Is the Beginning*.

Daniel Barenboim, world famous Israeli pianist-conductor, and Palestinian-born Edward Said, professor of Comparative Literature at Columbia University for 40 years, collaborated on a unique way to help Arabs and Jews in the Middle East listen to each other and make a dent in the endless political and religious tensions of the region.

In 1999, they co-founded the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra for talented youth. For six years, young musicians from Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon and Syria came together for six weeks in a summer "music and reconciliation camp," first in Germany, then in Spain. The students performed together, lived together, heard seminars together. They talked about the social-political-religious tensions they were subject to year round. Their fathers had fought against each other in war after war, terrorist attack after attack; they listened to each other's stories, points of view, fears, prejudices, hopes and dreams. The project culminated in 2005 in an unprecedented concert in the Palestinian city of Ramallah. In order to allow the students to all travel to Palestine, because many of them couldn't get visas from their own country to go there, the King of Spain made them all diplomats of the Spanish government so they had diplomatic immunity to travel. Barenboim said, you see, "The impossible is easier than the difficult."

And 3rd level, where integrity has the power to liberate an entire people or change the entire world, integrity is not just a moral concept, it's a moral passion. With bows to Patricia Ellsberg, because everyone here is familiar with her efforts and the efforts of her husband Daniel to end the Vietnam War by choosing to release the Pentagon Papers and face what turned out to be a possible 115 consecutive years in prison (if not, see *The Most Dangerous Man in America*); I'm going to tell a different story.

Many of you are familiar with Viktor Frankl, the Austrian psychiatrist who spent 3 ½ years in Nazi concentration camps in World War II, including Auschwitz. Frankl was allowed to live because his job, as a psychiatrist, was to keep the other inmates from killing themselves so the Nazis could maintain their work force in the labor camps. I hope we're not losing this part of our heritage about integrity. You've heard this piece of writing from his book written after the war, *Man's Search for Meaning*: "Between a stimulus and a response there is a space. In that space is

our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom. The last of human freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given circumstances.”

He also spoke about that freedom to choose in this way: “We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.”

You may not be as familiar with a contemporary of Frankl's, Jacques Lusseyran, a resistance fighter in France during World War II. Jacques had been blinded in an accident as a young boy and grew up feeling he was guided physically as well as morally by an inner light. So when the Vichy government capitulated to the Nazi occupation of France, at the age of 16 he organized 600 youth in a resistance organization to write, print, and distribute daily newsheets that reported to the French people what was really going on in Paris under the occupation. He was eventually captured and spent a year and a half in Buchenwald. He survived because he could speak French, German and Russian, so he was useful to his captors as a translator. And while there, one night, standing outside the barracks, he began reciting poetry in French, and German, and Russian, and slowly the prisoners gathered around, eventually some 50 men in all, they all began softly reciting poetry from their childhoods, in Hungarian or Romanian, whether they understood each other's languages or not, drawn together, as he wrote later in his book *And There Was Light*, by their “one cloak of humanness, kept alive by the things without weight, hope, poetry, freedom, love.”

We may not all find ourselves in these circumstances or have the opportunity to see our actions, borne of moral passion, ripple out to so many, but from the Talmud in the Jewish wisdom tradition: “He who saves one life saves the world entire.” Because the effort, the intention and the integrity, it takes to save one life is precisely the same – vision, values, generosity, kindness, compassion, equanimity, that it takes to save the entire world.

How do we cultivate and strengthen an authentic practice of it?

Our brains are hard-wired for integrity. The executive center of the brain - the pre-frontal cortex - that regulates the body and our emotions, that allows us to attune, empathize, be self-aware, be flexible in our responses, to listen to our deepest intuition and wisdom, is also the structure that supports morality or empathy for the common good. This means integrity can be seen as a learnable skill, and as we do these practices we are rewiring the brain to support more integrity.

Intention is the first step, of course, as with any practice in our tradition. We can set an intention to practice more rigorously the core values, principles, precepts of our tradition. James offers a re-frame of don'ts of the traditional 5 training precepts into positive behaviors:

- 1) Honor all life (refrain from killing)
- 2) Share your time and resources (refrain from stealing)
- 3) Take care with sexual energy, respecting boundaries, offering safety

- 4) Speak kindly and carefully (refrain from unskillful speech) speak compassionately; listen empathically, to your self and others
- 5) Develop clear mind and healthy body (refrain from using intoxicants that cloud the mind and lead to heedlessness)

What's so useful about reframing the precepts from not doing a negative action into doing a positive one is that when we stop doing something negative nothing much changes in our brains, but when we pro-actively cultivate doing something positive, we are pro-actively rewiring our brains toward the wholesome.

We can set the intention to embody and express these precepts in our daily lives; we can also set the intention to follow all the practices in our tradition to anchor more and more fully in the True Nature that is the guide, the inner nudge to following these precepts, but that also allows us to discern what's right and what's wrong when we don't know what's right or wrong. We're figuring it out in the moment.

Mindfulness is essential: to pay attention, notice and name patterns of behavior we are unconsciously, automatically acting out, see our core principles to shift our perspective and discern options and then choose wisely.

Equanimity is essential, and integrity is essential to equanimity. Our moral compass is like the keel of a sailboat; it keeps us steady on our course through the storms of life. Equanimity practice keeps us on an even keel when facing the 8 winds of change: traditionally, success and failure, gain and loss, praise and blame, pleasure and pain. Any duality, hope and disappointment, generosity and envy, courage and fear, pride and shame, love and hate, strength and vulnerability, respect and contempt. We do practice of equanimity to hold these 8 winds of change, not just that they are inevitable in life but that sometimes our conscious and conscientious choice brings them on.

We hope our equanimity prevents remorse from arising, but sometimes it does. We experience pain when we don't live up to our integrity and we know we haven't even if no one else knows, and maybe there is no other cost except our deep pain, then we practice turning remorse into healthy remorse so we can accept, change and grow from it. Equanimity is what allows us to face any remorse or regret with a compassionate and open heart.

Self compassion is essential to strengthening integrity. Where there is the pain of remorse or regret, we respond to that moment of remorse or regret with self-compassion: Ouch! This hurts! And bring care and comfort for our own suffering on our journey, Self-compassion re-opens our heart again to the suffering of others just like us and it re-opens our minds to learn from the experience and as neuroscience writer Jonah Lehrer says, turn a regrettable moment into a teachable moment. We apply our understanding compassion and forgiveness, moment by moment so there is learning.

This is what happened.

This is what I did.

If available, this is why I did what I did.

(Understanding, Compassion, Forgiveness)

This has been the cost.

This is what I've learned.

This is what I would do differently now.

I can take pride, joy, gratitude for my capacity to wake up, learn and be more integrous.

Learning Model

Unconscious incompetence: we don't know how to do something, and we don't even know we don't know; ignorance is bliss, except when it isn't

Conscious incompetence: Now we know we don't know (the oh shit circuit)

Conscious competence: now we're learning; now we know; still a conscious effort

Unconscious competence: we are so practiced that the new behavior shows up automatically, we don't have to think about it anymore; effortless.

Perseverance is essential to this learning model; trying again and again, repeated experiences of cultivating the wholesome and letting go of the unwholesome, strengthening the habit of integrity until it becomes part of our neural circuitry as well as the essence of our being.

One of my favorite teachings, when I first came to practice was the Buddha teaching we should "practice as though our hair were on fire." This practice meant business! Another of my favorite quotes is "The difference between try and triumph is a little umph. Even if our hair isn't on fire, we bring a little umph to our practice. To be realistic, it's enough, as Paul Gilbert says in *The Compassionate Mind*, to make our wise choices "little and often" Little and often is what will create new habits in our brains and in our behaviors. Or as James said last night, "Smidgeons count. Don't underestimate the power of smidgeons."

While we're developing our own authentic practice and learning from our own practice, we're also learning by participating in communities like this one, and from teachers who act as role models of integrity.

I once faced a difficult ethical dilemma, having committed to one thing, then another more appealing thing came along. And I remembered a story I heard about Jack Kornfield: that he had the opportunity to meet the Dalai Lama but he had already committed to seeing his daughter's high school play; he went to see the play. And another story of Sylvia Boorstein who had the opportunity to meet with the publisher of Shambala Sun, but she already had a commitment to take a friend who was a shut in to lunch. She met her friend for lunch. I remembered those two stories, and made my decision in the same direction, to honor the original commitment and let go of "the better offer."

Gather into your life role models of how to be loving, how to be kind, how to be resilient, how to cope with suffering, how to have integrity, how to stay aligned, how to deepen an authentic practice.

Aliveness, which is really about wholeness

The Latin root word of integrity is integer – an undivided or whole number. When we experience wholeness, we experience no division or fragmentation within ourselves, and when we connect with the wholeness of others, we experience no separation, which is joy.

My friend Stan Stefancic, Unitarian minister, active for years in civil rights movement, told me the familiar phrase “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect,” could be translated differently from the Greek to mean, “Be ye therefore whole, even as your Father in heaven is whole.” And Howard Thurman, African-American minister in San Francisco said, “Don’t ask what the world needs. Do what makes you come alive. For what the world needs is people who have come fully alive.” Aliveness means integrity, means wholeness.

“Wandering Around an Albuquerque Airport Terminal”

By Naomi Shihab Nye

After learning my flight was detained 4 hours, I heard the announcement: If anyone in the vicinity of gate 4-A understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.

Well — one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate. I went there. An older woman in full traditional Palestinian dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. Help, said the flight service person. Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be four hours late and she did this.

I put my arm around her and spoke to her haltingly. Shu dow-a, shu-biduck habibti, stani stani schway, min fadlick, sho bit se-wee? The minute she heard any words she knew — however poorly used — she stopped crying. She thought our flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for some major medical treatment the following day. I said, No, no, we’re fine, you’ll get there, just late, who is picking you up? Let’s call him and tell him.

We called her son and I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane and would ride next to her. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out, of course, they had ten shared friends. Then I thought, just for the heck of it, why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her. This all took up about 2 hours. She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life. Answering questions.

She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies — little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts — out of her bag — and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single woman declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the traveler from California, the lovely woman from Laredo — we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There are no better cookies.

And then the airline broke out the free beverages from huge coolers — non-alcoholic — and the two little girls for our flight, one African-American, one Mexican-American — ran around serving us all apple juice and lemonade and they were covered with powdered sugar, too.

And I noticed my new best friend — by now we were holding hands — had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in this gate — once the crying of confusion stopped — has seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women, too. This can still happen, anywhere.

Not everything is lost.