

I've had an insight through all this focus on comparing mind, critical mind, contentious mind. Oh my, be careful what you focus on. By last week I was beginning to wonder if there was ever a moment in my day when I wasn't in contention with something! Especially in contrast with Rick's talk last week about healthy desire, feeling the uplift of that, the wise effort and joy of that.

Yet, there is wise effort in learning to harness the powers of our comparing minds, our critical minds, even our contentious minds for the good. And to use these processes of mind, that are so innate to human survival, so innate to the dilemmas of being a human being, as opportunities for practice, for waking up, for holding our experiences in conscious, compassion that itself is a gateway to connection with our fellow human beings caught in the same contractions and suffering.

Contend means: 1) to struggle or vie in opposition or rivalry; to compete; 2) to strive in debate, dispute; 3) to assert or maintain earnestly. It's the third definition I would offer as the wise effort of contention. Of wise contention. There are times when it's so important to be able to push back or fight back when there is injustice, oppression, suffering because of poverty or lack of opportunity. This is the wise effort of harnessing the life force, harnessing the power of being alive that wants to be alive, that fights to be alive. I overheard folks leaving the sitting group last week quoting Dylan Thomas famous poem: Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light. I came upon another poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, that was resurrected when the Chilean miners who had been trapped underground for 69 days in a mine cave-in were finally rescued, all 33 of them, by government workers and volunteers who simply did not give up:

Life is real! Life is earnest! And the grave is not its goal; dust thou art, to dust returnest, was not spoken of the soul.... Lives of great men all remind us we can make our lives sublime, and, departing, leave behind us footprints on the sands of time; Footprints, that perhaps another, sailing o'er life's solemn main, a forlorn and shipwrecked brother, seeing, shall take heart again.

Many of you know the harnessing of this fierce life force. Some of you a member of my family was recently diagnosed with Crohn's disease, a painful, incurable inflammation and scarring of the intestines. It's terrible and terrifying, and my relative is very young. And his parents have so shown up to get the tests and get the treatment that will stabilize him and allow him to live a creative, productive life. Many of you have shown up, or had people show up for you, when death came knocking at the door, and you or people who loved you said NO!

This passionate life force that pushes against tragedy is the same passionate life force that pushes against injustice. Whether that passion for justice and the dignity of life, the right to life, is harnessed by a Martin Luther King or a Mahatma Gandhi or a Nelson Mandela, and the non-violence, non-harming needed for a passionate contention to remain compassionate is something we'll talk about in just a moment, or by a Johanna Brindriff who spoke here last week about the passionate, fierce harnessing of the life force by so many to build a school and provide an

education for 77 girls in Kenya to bring more justice and dignity and opportunity and safety of life to that country.

We want to be able to be in wise contention with the injustices, the suffering we human beings create by not contending with poverty, or the lack of opportunity, or injustice and oppression of any kind.

Where contention goes awry in the human heart and mind is when that heart and mind contracts into a narrower view of suffering and of self, of me and mine. I think it was Harold that said the problem with all of these states of mind – comparing, criticizing, contending – is that they contract around a fear or threat to self, or anything the self identifies with – our family or tribe or race or nation, and loses the conscious, compassionate connection to others, to others as ourselves. We lose the connection to the life force itself, and our pushing back becomes harnessed to force but not to life.

From this contraction, this narrowing of identity, this narrowing of view, we can get locked into rigid positions. Last week we looked at the challenges to our peace of mind and well-being when we get caught in how things should be, when how things are at the moment is going against our values or expectations of what should be. With contention, we get constricted into a view of how things must be. We lose our options and anyone else's options. It's not whether our view is necessarily right or wrong that's the problem; it's the locking into any view that's the problem. In the examples I gave earlier about wise contention, my relative's parents have to move right past any denial or contention with life that this disease is happening, and into exploring options at Kaiser and UCSF, staying open to many different treatment options, seeing what works. The rescuing Chilean miners trapped underground or freeing an entire nation of apartheid, Jim Crow, or the rule of the Raj, requires keeping options open. We can't keep our options open if we've closed our minds and hearts to other points of view, to strategies other than our personal position.

Keeping our minds and hearts open, keeping our options open, requires seeing clearly and accepting what is as what is. That doesn't mean we don't stand up and push back, but we see clearly and accept what it is that we are pushing back against, including all the confusion and ignorance that is creating all the injustice or suffering we are pushing back against.

This keeping our hearts and minds open keeps us out of contention with life. We're not arguing with life itself, with the 10,000 causes upstream that shape the manifestations of the life force in the manifestations we are dealing with in the present moment. Sylvia Boorstein would teach sometimes it's easier to forgive other human beings, fragile and vulnerable as they are, than it is to forgive life for how it's unfolding in this moment. Fred Luskin, who is speaking at James Baraz's Awakening Joy course tonight, teaches about forgiveness, that we have to stop arguing with life or with our partner, we have to give up our rules about how things must be, in order to move out of contention and into forgiveness. Mary Oliver says in her poem When Death Comes:

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

So how do we come out of contention, out of argument and dispute, out of struggling in
opposition, out of locking into a rigidly held point of view, into allowing, accepting, consenting
– our original trajectory – into contentment.

We return to the first noble truth, that life does have tragedy and suffering inherent in it, that
illness, loss, death are integral to human existence, to all of existence. We don't dispute that.

Gilda Radner, the fabulous comedian on Saturday Night Live, said shortly before she died of
cancer, I wanted a perfect ending. Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't
rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not
knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing
what's going to happen next. Delicious Ambiguity.

We become as resourced as we know how to be, through practice, through community and
sangha, to allow our hearts and minds to be present, open, engaging with what is, resourcing
again, allowing, accepting what is as what is. Not having to like it or agree with it. Coming out
of argument doesn't necessarily mean agreeing it means accepting, and consenting to accepting.
So not just "oh, all right", but "hmmm." What is this and, as a member of the Deepening Joy
group shared last weekend, and what can I do to make this less difficult?

So contentious mind and consenting mind are almost polar opposites. I disagree! I accept. I lock
up. I open. I say no! I say yes.

I said earlier how important the stance of non-violence or ahimsa (non-harming) is for wise
contention – to be able to push back against injustice or oppression, to assert or maintain
earnestly, broadening our vision again to the life force that is always present in every event, even
when our view is focused on the event itself, while keeping our hearts open to the humanity the
true nature of the people we are pushing back against. Harnessing the life force of compassion,
loving kindness, love on behalf of life, truth, and wisdom. When we can move in our minds and
hearts from contention – the forces of aversion, hatred, ill will, to consenting – seeing clearly and
accepting what is as what is, then we can align our efforts with the life force. We are not in
contention with what is, we are aligned with accepting what is and then moving into whatever
wise action, wise effort, becomes available to us.

Q Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, love mercy, walk humbly.
now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.

- The Talmud

To get practical about this, again coming into our groups of four to share in the struggle with contention and in the wisdom of practice: 3 minutes each

Identify a moment of contention in your own life – a disagreement with your spouse or child, a position around doing the dishes or doing homework, where you've gotten rigid, a dispute with life itself about something that must be or cannot be. Then identify what practices, what wise view, helps you come into more opening your heart, accepting what is, consenting to accept what is, and if there's time, what wise action or wise contention might emerge from that more open, more consenting state of mind.