

## Role Models, Refuges, and Resources

San Rafael Meditation Group

November 2, 2011

Tonight I'm picking up this year's theme of mindfulness and relationships. Relationships could be an object of mindfulness. Mindfulness trains us to pay attention to experiences in the present moment, starting with the breath and body sensations, then the feeling tone of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Steadying the mind so we can open to more complex objects of awareness – mental contents – emotions – waves of sensation flowing through body, and emotions arise in response to something in relationship to something. Paying attention to our experiences in relationship can trigger cascades of more emotions: fear, guilt, anger, joy, happiness, can trigger stories, thoughts, belief systems, can trigger complex processes of envy, comparing, judgment, as well as the complex processes of relief, forgiveness, gratitude. Relationships can be a focus of our attention in these mental contents, stories, dramas, traumas. We can become aware of suffering when we focus our attention on our experience in relationship. We can also become aware of healing and awakening.

It's the aspects of relationship as healing and awakening I want to focus on tonight as prelude to next three weeks on relationships as spiritual practice. The season is turning and we're heading into a colder, darker time of year. We are also heading in to a holiday season, originally a holy-day season, where many of our ancestors turned toward each other to generate the support of community and kinship through gatherings and celebrations, through ritual, to renew their faith and hope in the coming year.

We're sitting here tonight in a Buddhist sangha, heading into those cultural rituals we grew up in, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, the turn of the dark toward the light at Solstice, heading into the new year. And there may be sorrow and suffering as we re-connect the threads that tie us to family and "tribe"; there may be joy, excitement curiosity, delight, gratitude, too.

Sylvia Boorstein once said that relationships are the 9<sup>th</sup> step on the 8-fold path, and it's in that spirit that I want to explore mindfulness and relationships in ways that will help us embody the dharma, steady our minds, open our hearts and deepen our capacities for relational intelligence as we deepen our Wise Effort relating to our selves and others.

Tonight we explore 3 R's of relationships as spiritual practice: role models, refuges, and resources.

1. Role models: we all need maps and instructions on how life works, including the map of the Buddhist tradition, 8-fold path, 7 factors of enlightenment, 4 brahma viharas. We need to "crack the code" as Jennifer Berezan says in her song Praises for the World.

Pema Chodron taught a retreat at Omega Institute last weekend in upstate New York; I was able to watch part of the retreat with friends as it was streamed live from Omega. About 20 minutes into her talk, Pema shared that the book she's been reading recently is *Buddha's Brain*, and shared some of what she's been learning from Rick about how and why the evolutionary hard-wiring of the brain makes us vulnerable to suffering. Part of the map.

People embody those maps and instructions, and pass them on to us through their teachings – we all have been taught the wholesome and unwholesome, by parents, siblings and other relatives, teachers, coaches, partners, therapist, master practitioners in our spiritual tradition of choice. We're taught by people's words – their advice, their lessons but also by their behaviors – we see how people act in the world and the results of their actions. And learn which behaviors are skillful in which situations and which are not.

*A single conversation with a wise person is worth 10 years of study.*  
- Chinese proverb

We also learn by people's living – being in the energy field of a person who deeply lives and embodies the dharma changes our energy, our experience of our being. When we are in relationship with role models, we are in spiritual practice.

At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by the spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.  
- Albert Schweitzer

People are refuges and we take turns with that, too. A week ago Friday, I happened to get a phone call from my brother Barry just as Gay Watson (you may remember Gay as a guest teacher last February when we were still at Falkirk) walked through my house into my garden for tea. My sister-in-law had been admitted to the hospital for surgery to clear an infection in her left breast, even though my brother took her to the ER and stayed with her until she was admitted, and even though a mammogram and ultrasound had cleared any concern about a tumor or a cyst, Mary was about to go under the knife to drain her the fluid that had accumulated, and my brother came home collapsed into a deep terror of losing his "rock", of course. So I can hear the agitation and desperateness in my brother's voice. I can feel his discombobulated energy right through the phone – at least he has called me for another rock to hang on to, and then Gay walks out into the garden where I'm on the phone, overhears the talk of hospital and surgery and of course you're worried, and simply comes to stand by me; she doesn't walk off into another part of the garden to look at the impatiens and give me my space; she stands right by me and listens with her head kind of bowed quietly, the bodhisattva of compassion, and so there's the living lesson in relationship as refuge.

Buddha taught is to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, the community of like minded seekers. William Shakespeare, from a completely different tradition, writes of people as refuge this way in this Sonnet 29, and you can hear the "Thee" of the refuge as a person or his sense of the divine.

*When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,  
I all alone beweep my outcast state  
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries  
And look upon myself and curse my fate,  
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,  
Featured like him, like him with friends possess'd,*

*Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,  
 With what I most enjoy contented least;  
 Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,  
 Haply I think on thee, and then my state,  
 Like to the lark at break of day arising  
 From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;  
 For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings  
 That then I scorn to change my state with kings.*  
*William Shakespeare*

3. Relationships as resource. Resource means a source of aid or support from others, or a capacity within ourselves, to help us deal with events that happen in life, including events that happen with other people. I take resource to also mean re-Source – a person or practice that helps us get in touch again with the larger Source – Beingness – from which all matter and all manner of existence arise from and fall away into.

I was walking on a trail last Friday and ran into friends whom I was going to watch the Pema retreat with in just a few moments. One of them read the writing on my t-shirt: Discover the world; take a walk. I've worn this t-shirt for maybe a decade; it's one of my favorites, and I had forgotten those words were on it. Our spiritual friends can reflect back to us, remind us of the wisdom already within us, and the source of that wisdom within us.

Tara Brach told a story of re-Source recently, on a webinar on mindfulness and psychotherapy, about Ram Dass. Even after 30 years of meditation and yoga practices from many different traditions, when Ram Dass has his massive stroke 8 years ago, even all those practices at first weren't enough to hold the physical pain and the existential terror he was facing. Suffering. It wasn't until Ram Dass called on the loving presence of his spiritual teacher Neem Karoli Baba, a relationship in virtual that re-Sourced him; he felt held again in a large being-ness, a larger love, then he knew he could handle the pain and suffering of the stroke, and as we know from his book *Fierce Grace*, he did.

Wisdom and compassion have always been the two wings of the dharma. All the Western teachers of Buddhist meditation now are emphasizing compassion as well as mindfulness. Mindfulness and compassion in relationships as the 9<sup>th</sup> step of the 8-fold path. I'd like us to explore people as role models, refuges, and resources as these 3 R's of relationship as spiritual practice. And I'd like to do that in small groups of 4, to get to know each other and the commonalities of our struggles to be mindfulness and compassion in relationships, to share each others' wisdom and questions, and to build the sense of community in this sangha.

And as Pema said on her retreat just a few short hours later, as she was preparing the retreatants for the Q&A, you may not agree with what you're hearing another person say; let yourself simply enjoy the sharing.

So please group yourselves in groups of four and then I'll give instructions.

We'll do three rounds of everyone sharing 1) who has been a role model for you in relationships as spiritual practice (or in relationships, or in spiritual practice) 2) who has been a refuge for you (could be spiritual figure like Buddha, Quan Yin, Dalai Lama also) 3) who has helped you re-Source into a sense of the divine or larger sense of being or loving presence. Each of you has about one minute to answer the first question, going around the group, then each of you has another minute to answer the second question, going around the group, then each of you has another minute to answer the third question, going around the group again.

De-brief in large group.

*Ah, the comfort,  
The inexpressible comfort  
Of feeling safe with a person.  
Having neither to weigh out thoughts  
Nor words,  
But pouring them all right out, just as they are,  
Chaff and grain together;  
Certain that a faithful hand  
Will take them and sift them;  
Keeping what is worth keeping and,  
With the breath of kindness,  
Blow the rest away.  
- Dinah Craik*