

For the next four weeks I'll be speaking about the Three Characteristics of Existence: Suffering, Impermanence, and Non-Self – dukka, anicca, anatta and Wise Effort – the wise choices we can make that create good karma so that:

1) skillful dealing with suffering can lead to liberation from greed, hatred, delusion, into trust, love, joy and well-being and can open us to a sense of vulnerability and dependence for ourselves or others, that leads to deep experiences of inter-connectedness;

2) wise comprehension of impermanence can lead to the acceptance of what is, gain and loss, praise and blame, pleasure and pain, success and failure, can lead to a sense of trustworthy cycles of life and a sense of abundant enoughness and awareness of the larger awareness of the unconditioned or the beingness that always is in never born and never dies.

3) embracing the experience of non-self with openness and curiosity can lead to profound experiences of our true nature, our Buddha nature. We will explore how to wisely works with each of these 3 characteristics over the next 3 weeks and the fourth week we'll look at wise effort in general, to shift our awareness of experience to experiencing well-being, abundant enoughness, and the unconditioned and our true nature. Sylvia Boorstein calls wise effort the unsung hero of the noble 8-fold path, or as Rick said a few weeks ago, the enobling 8-fold path.

Mention FACES book 52 Quotes and Weekly Mindfulness practices available online www.facesconferences.com. Coordinator of the conferences, Richard Fields, asked 30 different well-known, even revered mindfulness teachers to choose a quote, mostly from Buddhist wisdom teachings but not always, write a commentary on the quote and then suggest a mindfulness practice to wisely strengthen whatever wisdom or benefit is pointed to in the quote.

Some of the teachers: Jack Kornfield, Sylvia Boorstein, Tara Brach, Sharon Salzberg, Phillip Moffett, Rick Hanson, Frank Ostaseski, people we know and learn from.

Sample quotes:

When one door of happiness closes, another opens, but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one that has been opened for us.

- Helen Keller

Wherever you are, that is the entry point.

- Kabir

The essence of bravery is being without deception.

- Pema Chodron

You must be the change you wish to see in the world.

- Gandhi

*The biggest disease today is not leprosy or tuberculosis, but rather the feeling of not belonging.
- Mother Teresa*

*Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them, humanity cannot survive.
- Dalai Lama*

SUFFERING

We begin with suffering. The Buddha began with suffering. The first ennobling truth is the truth of the presence and inevitability of suffering in a human life. Not just because of impermanence (next week) or because of the non-existence of a fixed, personal self (the week after) but that there are external events that impinge upon our ease, our peace of mind, our well-being. There's really no credibility in any wisdom tradition without recognition of suffering.

*There is no way to escape growing old
There is no way to escape ill health.
There is no way to escape death.
There is no way to escape being separated from all that is dear to me and everyone I love.*

We, or someone dear to us, loses a job and the purpose and structure and community and validating that comes from that job and that income.

We face the loss of vision through macular degeneration or glaucoma or cataracts

Our car is stolen or our credit card is stolen and used or our heart is broken by someone who doesn't return our affection.

Then there's internal suffering as well, the fear, the anger, the shame, the confusion that comes up as well, in response to whatever is going on out there, and how events impact our sense of ourself and our place in the worlds. The second dart – how we can compound a legitimately challenging situation by less than skillful reactivity of our heart and mind. By endless rumination or recrimination, when we hide out in denial or dissociation and don't develop the practical skills we need to cope, when we lose sight of our true nature and smallify ourselves. Even the Dalai Lama says, "I am the cause of most of my suffering because of the habits of my own mind." And if the Dalai Lama struggles with reactivity, we're going to find it hard not to add to our own suffering by the reactivity – the habitual patterns of our hearts and minds, too.

I want to read to you the entire passage from the Anguttana Nikaya sutta on the Five Reflections that I began to share with you earlier:

*I am of the nature to grow old.
There is no way to escape growing old.*

*I am of the nature to have ill health.
There is no way to escape ill health.*

*I am of the nature to die.
There is no way to escape death.*

All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them.

*My actions are my only true belongings.
I cannot escape the consequences of my actions.
My actions are the ground upon which I stand.*

So an exploration of the Buddha's teachings about suffering leads to his teachings about karma. About our choices of actions, our choices of responses.

Helen Keller says, *All the world is full of suffering; it is also full of overcoming.*

I love this quote from Pema Chodron; I probably quote it at every other dharma talk, every other weekly e-quotes, it's in Chapter 16 of the book:

The Buddhist teachings are fabulous at simply working with what's happening as your path of awakening, rather than treating your life experiences as some kind of deviation from what is supposed to be happening. The more difficulties you have, in fact, the greater opportunity there is to let them transform you. The difficult things provoke all your irritations and bring your habitual patterns to the surface. And that becomes the moment of truth. You have the choice to launch into the lousy habitual patterns you already have, or to stay with the rawness and discomfort of the situation and let it transform you, on the spot. – Pema Chodron

So our response to suffering isn't just about being able to be aware, be accepting, be compassionate. It's about being willing to put in some effort to deal with that suffering where it will do some practical good. This famous quote by Viktor Frankl, an Austrian psychiatrist who survived almost 3 years in Nazi concentration camps, including Auschwitz.

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.

Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.

Or Julia Butterfly Hill, who lived 2 years at the top of a redwood tree to protect it and other trees in the old-growth forest from logging. *Every moment has a choice; and every choice has an impact.*

When we consciously choose how to respond to our suffering, or our perception of our suffering, and learn wiser and wiser ways to respond, we can redeem the suffering by learning lessons and changing our views. I just wrote a book on resilience – the capacity to deal with suffering, to cope, to bounce back, to return to baseline, to return to better than baseline. I learned: Shit happens, but shift happens, too. Indeed, the researchers at the Institute of Noetic Sciences who interviews over 100 dedicated practitioners and teachers of all wisdom traditions, about spiritual growth and transformation (including people like Adyashanti, Angeles Arrien, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Sylvia Boorstein, Sharon Salzberg, Rachel Naomi Remen, Br. David Stendl-Rast, Yvonne Rand, Ram Das, Frank Ostaseski, discovered that more than half of the people they interviews reported that the catalyst for changing their lives, transforming, even if not always on the spot, the catalyst to change had been their own personal pain and suffering. And I'm glad in his latest book, Bringing Home the Dharma, Jack Kornfield acknowledges, sometimes even really ardent, diligent meditation practice isn't enough to deal with the suffering of trauma; sometimes a really good trauma therapy is necessary to fully come to terms and grieve and forgive and heal and move through.

How to do that? How to work with suffering as a practice, a lifetime practice, to meet our suffering as a catalyst for growth and transformation.

The Buddha suggested the entire 8-fold ennobling path as the way to transform our suffering into compassion and awareness and liberation from suffering. Wise View, Wise Intention, Wise Effort for starters. There are many guides for wisely dealing with suffering in many wisdom traditions, many moral compasses to live by. I'm going to suggest one way, just one way for tonight, not the only way.

[Sign JOYISHOWHERE]

How many of you read Joy Is Nowhere?
How many read Joy Is Now Here?

I am not suggesting joy is a way to make suffering go away or even feel less painful in the moment. I'm only suggesting, as both ancient and contemporary dharma teachers suggest, as we bring the Pali canon up to date, that joy – or some flavor of joy – ease, contentment, tranquility, delight, happiness – is ever present, even in the midst of suffering. The laughter of children in a refugee camp, the touch of the sun on our face even when our mind is clouded. That even in moment of suffering, there is still awe and gratitude that anything exists at all. I have a practice, when I drop a glass or bowl and it shatters, to say “Physics!” Our universe operates by stable universal laws of physics (karma) and that deep stability and order can bring great joy. The comfort of knowing we're not alone in our pain, that our pain is the pain of the human condition. That we can experience 10,000 joys as well as 10,000 sorrows, even at the same time, and not take those sorrows so personally.

Jack Gilbert, poem A Brief for the Defense:

*We must risk delight. We can do without pleasure,
but not delight. Not enjoyment. We must have*

the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world.

If we're going to open our hearts and minds to the suffering we experience and others experience, on a daily basis, we must choose to notice and celebrate the joys, too.

I'm not saying that's easy. I'm just saying it's possible. To paraphrase the Buddha, if it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so. Liberation from suffering is possible when we are ardent, diligent, resolute and mindful, and skillful and persevering.

James Baraz teaches an entire 10 month course on Awakening Joy. I lead Deepening Joy groups in support of that course. Some of you are in those groups. James devotes Chapter 4 in the book and month 4 of the course to finding joy in difficult times. Not in spite of, not a flight in light, but in the midst of.

One way, just one way, is to notice joy and let it in, savor it. I've been to several conferences now where Dan Siegel will ask the audience, mostly psychotherapists, how many of them, ever had a graduate or undergraduate course in mental health. It's averaging about 5%. We focus on pathology and suffering, but not on health and well-being. Not until the positive psychology movement anyway. Now the research is showing when people can accept what is going on with compassion, take in the empathy of others for what is going on, and then still focus on experiences of happiness, even in the midst of the suffering, while the suffering is still going on – they not only feel better, they learn to work with the suffering, transform their response to the suffering and to themselves for experiencing the suffering, and heal faster. Or to translate, transform their sense of themselves and their experience faster.

Exercise – groups of four, two minutes each, a moment of suffering, how you chose to stay open to joy or awe or gratitude or ease in the midst of that, not to antidote or forget about suffering but to expand awareness to include both suffering and joy or awe or gratitude in the same moment. And what shifted as a result?

De-brief. Q&A

Sometimes we can change the conditions that cause our suffering. We can move away from a radioactive toxic waste dump or out of a flood zone; we can take medication to ease the pain of arthritis or the risk of high blood pressure. We can choose to not interact any more with someone who cannot see or respect our boundaries. Sometimes we cultivate the mindfulness and equanimity that allows us to see the truth of the conditions we're in and discern what wise action would be to change them, or accept them, or forgive them. Even there, it's probably some vision of health or well-being that provides part of the motivation for taking that particular action.

Failure is not fatal, but failure to change might be. – John Wooden.

Working with suffering skillfully to take wise action around it, can also open us up to the interconnectedness of all of life in a very powerful way. We feel it keenly when we see an innocent

child or innocent animal suffer needless pain, because we're hardwired to. We feel it keenly when anyone we open our hearts to is suffering. Empathy and compassion are hardwired in, and can be diligently cultivated. With practice, with sincere practice, we can maintain an open heart of the suffering of those it is difficult to stay open to, to even want to stay open, too.

So we use wise effort to cope with suffering well. Live well. Laugh often. Love much.

My actions are my only true belongings.

I cannot escape the consequences of my actions.

My actions are the ground upon which I stand.

Closing:

May all beings be free of suffering, and from all causes of suffering, and from causing any suffering.