

FINDING A WAY FORWARD: IS THERE A PATH TO HEALING?

“A Buddhist Healing: Destination and Path As One”

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July 9, 2017

Thank you so much for inviting me to speak of a path to healing that derives from Buddhist traditions. It's a privilege. I remember when I first made Rensselaerville my home, and high-tailed to your church as soon as I could get in the door, so beautiful and commanding is this structure. I felt and sensed a luminosity as I stood there; if we speak of light when we attempt to express the ineffable, this was a sacred moment of light that I cherish, and a theme we'll visit again this morning. Since then, I've sung in the church many times with the Village Voices, and attended services at times; I even somehow became engaged in a modest way with contributing to the history of the local church that was published not long ago. In a very personal and very real way, I feel at home here, even though I found the way in my life to a tradition quite different – if in the end, quite congruent – with the beliefs and prayers of the Presbyterian church. Thank you again for this opportunity to share with you some thoughts on a healing path from a Buddhist perspective.

To start, we can surely all agree with some reluctance that the need for such a path is in nearly excruciating evidence: precious little in our present world is not in need of healing, and our challenge is indeed to find our way forward and beyond this present state of mistaken direction, lost opportunities and serious confusion. You could make the argument that things have always been so. In fact, scientists recently discovered that humankind has been around far longer than had previously been thought: we've had an extra 100,000 years to mess things up, and we just don't stop. This is not to say that there have not been people, beings of wisdom, heart and good will, here all along, and they're here with us now, to be sure. There are said to be buddhas among us, doing their best to help. The beautiful piece of music we heard this morning, one of my very favorites, attests to the power of one such enlightened being, Jesus, and a profound yearning for his return to give to us the greatest healing of all. Yet, with the planet facing quite possible destruction, infrastructures crumbling, greed rampant to benefit the few, with resultant growing inequality and poverty; with racism, terrible violence daily and unchecked expressions of hatred rising in the social media and the political sphere like bilious steam from below; not to mention illness, disease, human suffering, war and wars that just keep on coming, and so much more: today we might all be feeling as our musical interlude so movingly sings for us our *plea*: "E'en so, Lord Jesus *quickly come*." We so long for peace, grace, love – to sing holy, *holy* and rejoice – so that "*night shall be no more*." We are challenged, each of us and together, to find a path of healing forward.

You might have noticed that the title of my remarks, "*A Buddhist Healing: Destination and Path As One*," gives us a clue that doesn't make much sense from a logical point of view. A path is expected to take us *to* a destination, not be inseparable from it. How can we already *be* where we want to *go*? Where do we *arrive* if we're already *there*? The great Zen master I studied with many years ago at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, a monastic setting in a California wilderness, once observed that "If it's not *paradoxical*, it's not *true*." With this, I believe he is telling us that on the deepest level of awareness, understanding, realization and effectiveness in finding a way to heal ourselves, others and our world, our minds that are conditioned to expect to find a path in a textbook, a self-help straight and narrow linear way, a formulaic approach, simply will not work. We need to find a way that in fact doesn't make any sense at all in the ordinary sense, but is directly experienced by each of us. Without rational reasoning or elaborate conceptual contrivance, in this way we have arrived at a path forward that can show us, no doubt to our amazement and great relief, that *we have always been at our destination*. We just haven't known it. Or better: we've known it, but our insistence on defining it in terms of what we've conditioned ourselves to think is all that is real, has gotten us off course. We think we see, we think we know, because we rely strictly and exclusively on the appearances standing there before us, what we define with confidence as the parameters of reality, which in fact contaminate our perspective, so that our perception is all askew. A common Buddhist image for this is to say that we take the reflection of the moon in water for the moon itself.

To turn to your venerable scriptures, a teaching of Jesus that points toward this paradoxical truth, parallel in Buddhist thought, is found in Mark 9, verses 33 through 37:

Then they came to Capernaum, and when he [Jesus] was in the house he asked them [his disciples], “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” Then he took a little child and put it among them and taking it in his arms he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

I think we can fairly say that Jesus was talking on one level, at least, about humility, the poison of ego and self-regard, self-cherishing; pride that is derived from the abyss that stands between us when we compare and make judgments and calculations about the self whose distinctness we protect from the other, who is experienced as a similarly concrete, distant and distinct, permanent self. In this, we miss entirely the brilliant ecology of being, the vast matrix of interdependence showing us that no single one of us is a permanent entity; there is no fixed self separate from all others or from anything else that comprises our world. And Buddhism with its teaching of karma, cause and effect that results from our actions which indeed color our perception and keep us in a state of confusion, would agree that the

healing for this misperception is to experience directly its *opposite*: more paradox here. To be “last, and servant to all,” means to turn upside down the very sense of a better-than-equal separate self to be defended to survive, which is the source of confusion in the first place. To realize this, in Buddhism called “the wisdom of equality,” each and every one of us as a potential buddha, however reprobate at this moment, would surely be healing on at least this first level of reflection. To approach each other with the humility Jesus demands would be a first step on the path toward the healing of fear and protectiveness, the divisiveness and sense of isolation that the rigid sense of a separate, unchanging and permanent self brings with it.

But to return to the Zen master and his paradox, there can be seen another meaning in this great teaching found in the gospels; it could be suggested that Jesus had something more in mind as well, in speaking to his disciples of welcoming, or being as, a child. For after all, what *is* a child? What are its characteristics? A child enters the world with certain karmic predispositions that it is born with, certainly; but in entering this world of ours, it is obliged to start from scratch to find out what the general agreement is, about what is real in the present world. To accomplish this, it must *begin* by knowing *nothing*. While it is subjected to the prevailing definitions of appearance and reality that the adults around it have agreed is what defines the shape of the world we share, the child’s mind is required to be *open*. Sadly, it often finds that what it perceives to be real doesn’t tally at all with what those around it insist can be relied on among those appearances surrounding us. To

survive, the child might before long be obliged to close down a natural impulse, a direct intuition of the sacred that could say so much more than is known by this misleading collective definition of “things as they are”. In the absence of certainty, as a beginner, the child listens and believes. Inured for a while, at least, from that invented separate self that the adult has found perverse safety in, declaring that appearance is our sole reality, and that’s the end of it - in its initial innocence and openness, the mind of the child is truly empty. The master I spoke of called this initial impulse toward genuineness “Beginner’s Mind.” As he puts it: “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind but few.” Too commonly, we see the moon reflected in the water and “know” that it’s the moon. To approach every moment as a *beginner* rather than as an *expert* is to be as a *child*. We as adults can choose to embrace the ease and honesty of this approach to much that we encounter in our lives that may be problematic, bringing the paradoxical power of humility and openness to a healing, fresh experience. In doing so, we moment to moment may shake off the armored separate self, abandon valuing ourselves as the center of those appearances to which we bring our quite frozen expertise.

My Zen master, as well as the Tibetan master with whom I’ve studied for many years, would ask us to be as the child embraced by Jesus, who is innocent of knowing - and in this way, without the certainty of obstructions that we present to ourselves, we can directly experience a way of knowing that’s beyond the knowing of our usual, conditioned mind. A Korean master with whom I once spent a retreat

called it “*Don’t-know Mind.*” You’ve probably guessed, since you may have learned or have heard something about Buddhism, that meditation itself is a practice that allows us not to know, to be present at the destination, the path opened to us by the simplicity of simply *sitting*. The early master who brought Chan, or Zen Buddhism, to China, Bodhidharma, famously declared that by simply assuming the meditative posture – back straight, head balanced, eyes half-closed, body in a kind of anchored fulcrum, attention to our breathing – we are *already* enlightened. Would that it were so! Certainly in that moment when we aspire to clarity, we are at the destination on the path; in that moment, confusion and self-cherishing can be on their way to transformation into pure awareness and the naturally arising wish to be there for others in their suffering. This is surely the most profound definition of healing. Not necessarily “cure,” to be sure, but healing of our deluded perception that keeps us from the flowing continuity of unrestrained acts of compassion. Joseph Campbell once put it this way: “Genuine compassion for me is just what the word says; it is ‘suffering with.’ It is an immediate participation in the suffering of another to such a degree that you forget yourself and your own safety and spontaneously do what is necessary.” Another master put the process this way: To know the self is to forget the self; to forget the self is to be enlightened by all things.

It would be egregiously misleading to say here that even many, many sessions of simply sitting will lead invariably to the compassion that can heal our world and its many ills. More paradox: We may end up

there in our sitting, in utter simplicity and with comfort and ease and caring that we also may naturally bring to our everyday lives, without effort or self-consciousness, but there is always more to do on the path of healing. There are a number of traditional Buddhist ways of actually cultivating the healing power of compassion, too many to go into here in any detail, but that can also move that path forward. I might point out that the most fundamental and immediately fruitful has been said to be that of “*exchanging the self for others*,” called *Tonglen* in Tibetan. This is quite a bit more elaborate than simply thinking of being in the other person’s shoes, although that in itself does indeed break through a lot of the walls that stand between us and caring about the other. In *Tonglen*, it can be an unexpectedly rewarding experience to immerse oneself in the pain and suffering of another; to take it on within oneself; to visualize its purification, its healing, and send it back to the subject for its benefit. Tibetan Buddhism, particularly, employs a lot of such visualization in the cultivation of compassion. For the typical Westerner, traditional practices that bring us to merge with deities that embody specific characteristics of the enlightened mind take some cultural adjustment. Any difficulty is circumvented by realizing that, as with study with a lama who is descended from a lineage of great teachers, the work is all done in recognizing and merging with the lama or wisdom within, the enlightened characteristic within ourselves, as focused on in each practice. Here we can experience, at least glimpse, our own fundamental nature patiently waiting for us to wake up and see beyond the moon and its reflection. I sometimes think of this as analogous in a way to Christian communion, by the way. *Path as*

destination: we're already there, but our perspective is beset with obstacles that we ourselves create. It takes application and perseverance. And on that path, we can cultivate with practice, day by day, other virtues with healing qualities that reach well beyond the self, resulting ultimately in the highest connection of the mind to its ground, behaviors called in Buddhism the *Five Perfections*:

Generosity: To maintain a sense of open-handedness, to sincerely wish to give everything possible that is of value to oneself to others, should that "necessary moment arrive" that Campbell talks about, without calculation of any result or wish for merit or reward.

Discipline: Awareness of the quality of one's impulses, to be aware of the results of the smallest action, so as to avoid doing harm to others, to seize opportunities to benefit others, and to dedicate any positive result to that benefit.

Patience: As observed earlier, there is no shortage of destructive behaviors to which we are exposed, such as anger, hatred, selfishness, attacks of uncountable variety that we may encounter or produce ourselves; also, to cultivate patience when wronged or indisposed by circumstances.

Diligence: *Passion* to seize the opportunities given us as human beings to cultivate awareness, compassion, meaningful and useful action to benefit beings; not just a little, every now and then, but with every

bone in our body and full capacity for conscious discernment and application.

Concentration: This can on a certain level reference the signal importance of meditation, cultivating the meditative mind and bringing its insights into everyday activities, through conjoining the mind and our breath; it also points to bringing attention to our penchant for distraction, for regularly mistaking appearance for reality; we can turn instead to cultivating awareness of this delusion.

Wisdom: To cultivate through meditation as fundamental to the path to compassion and healing, to study, contemplate, reflect and discern through the wisdom of direct experience, what is at the ground of things - the pure and ineffable *nature of mind*, not the busy product of our busy brains - uncontaminated by our confusion.

It has been said in the traditions I've encountered, Zen and Tibetan, that the wish to study, contemplate and practice Buddhism and to achieve ultimate understanding of the ground from which arise the appearances that distract us as well as the goodness it's our birthright to embody, is ultimately for one purpose only, and that is to benefit beings. Should there seem to be any merit in such activity, the merit itself is passed forward, dedicated to the healing of humankind.

Psalm 139, verses 1-14, expresses the joy of connecting to that ground from which *everything arises, all possibilities* – you may have

heard of the Buddhist concept of “Emptiness,” an early translation that leads us to even more paradox. All phenomena, concepts, delusion and yes, realization as well, spring naturally from this Emptiness, which might more accurately be characterized as *fullness*, the endless richness of *change*, of coming and going, of birth and death, creation and destruction, *timelessness* and *joy*. Infused with *luminosity* and the enveloping presence of *awareness* and *cognition*, the *energies* of our fundamental nature, the nature of mind, combine with these qualities to make for the very acts of compassion that we yearn for as we seek a path to healing. We are here, arrived, with the celebration of the Psalmist, Psalm 139:

“O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. Where can I *go* from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven you are there. If I make my bed below, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,’ even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for *darkness is as light to you*. For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together

in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. *Wonderful* are your works."

Tibetan Buddhism particularly, declares that the path to healing shared here this morning, can and over the centuries *has* led to the attainment that the Psalmist cries out is beyond reach, and *can* be realized in this lifetime. Should we aspire to such realization, holding to the path as we each take it to mean, we ourselves can embody and embrace with joy the all-encompassing presence, the knowledge, the discernment celebrated in these verses. The ecstasy, the joy that is there as we know ourselves and are known by God, is there for the taking: the destination is in the present always, as we assume the path. And as for the motif of paradox that has infused my remarks today, we find its most perfect expression in this Psalm: "Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you."

With all the darkness in the world that calls out so desperately for healing, we can take comfort and find inspiration in knowing that darkness and light arrive together for us and for one another on the path; and in their absolute, ultimate and most sacred manifestation, they are the healing power of light.

Peace and love. Amen.