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CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Connection, Meaning, & Hope in the Time of Coronavirus

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Last Sunday, we had the pleasure of hosting Bhante Sujatha, the Buddhist monk who has preached here at UUCF annually for the past ten years. This year Bhante's Dharma talk was titled, "Suffering Is Optional." A week later, our world has shifted due to increased restrictions related to the Coronavirus, and I would like us to reflect a little more on how the wisdom Bhante shared with us from the Buddhist tradition can continue to be a source of guidance for us. In the midst of a pandemic, what does it mean to say that, "Suffering is optional?"

I'll start with a story. The meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg was once co-leading a meditation retreat with her colleague Joseph Goldstein when a student came to see him filled with anxiety:

The man said, "I just had a terrible experience. I was meditating, felt tension in my jaw, and suddenly I realized what an uptight person I am, how I can't get close to anyone, and that I'm going to be alone for the rest of my life."

Joseph took a deep breath, and said, "You mean you felt some tension in your jaw."

The man plowed forward, saying, "I'm pretty sure I'll always be tense. I'll never change. I feel hopeless."

Joseph said: "You mean you felt some tension in your jaw."

The man continued barreling down this path of misery for some time, all because of a sore jaw, until Joseph interrupted him, and said,

“You’re having a painful experience. Why are you *adding* a horrible [story about yourself]?” (“Working with Pain”)

This experience parallels an ancient Buddhist teaching called **“The Arrow Sutta,”** which says that, “When hit with discomfort...we feel two afflictions: (1) the inevitable, physical feelings and (2) the additional, mental reactions.” For instance, if I accidentally hit my elbow on the side of the pulpit, there would be an inevitable, physical feeling of pain. But there might also be additional, mental reaction such as putting myself down, calling myself names, etc. The part I do have more control over is that second part.

The Arrow Sutta invites us to imagine these two afflictions as two arrows. We can’t do anything about the first arrow once it hits. Sometimes, despite our best efforts, we are hit with various inevitable afflictions. But the Arrow Sutta challenges us that we can practice letting go of those additional arrows of our mental reactions—instead of shooting them into ourselves.

This teaching is often summarized as **“*Pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional.*”** In the Buddhist tradition, that word suffering is translated from the ancient Pali word *dukkha*. A better English translation for suffering is “unsatisfactoriness.” So we might better say that, **“*Pain is sometimes inevitable, but unsatisfactoriness is optional.*”**

Now, I will readily confess that learning to stop shooting those optional second arrows of mental reactions into ourselves is easier said than done. As the meditation teacher Jack Kornfield has put it: **“*We are [often] quite loyal to our suffering.*”** Or, again, we could also translate that as, “We are often quite loyal to our habit of keeping ourselves *unsatisfied.*” It’s not that we shouldn’t try to change things that are negative and toxic. Rather, the invitation is to consider whether we are sometimes making a bad situation even worse than it has to be.

The good news is that learning different ways of being in the world—learning to grow spiritually—is part of why we show up to at UUCF week after week, even when we can only show up online. We come here to be reminded to practice *loving-kindness* with our imperfections. We come here to practice a more *tender, spacious, and respectful* relationship to ourselves, one another, and this world.

Notice that I said practice loving-kindness with our *imperfections*. I'm not talking about reaching some state of perfection. As you've heard me say before, quoting one of my colleagues, "**We are already saved from perfection.**" There is no perfect that works for all people, places and times.

Even experiencing enlightenment does *not* mean that everything will always be perfect or pain free. Instead, it means experiencing greater liberation from *optional* suffering: the second—and sometimes third, fourth, fifth, and sixth—arrows of mental reactions that we shoot into ourselves. Impermanence and change still happen to us all—enlightened or unenlightened. What we *can* change is *our relationship* to whatever is happening. Awakening is about experiencing greater openness, freedom, and equanimity with whatever is arising in our field of experience.

In the words of Vince Horn, one of my meditation teachers, "THIS is what we've been practicing for. Uncertainty, Suffering, Birth, Old Age, Sickness, & Death. Learning to work with these deeper truths of life — with dignity and an open heart — this is what practice is ultimately about."

Now, I know that meditation is not everyone's spiritual practice of choice. Even so, notice if there might be some tools here that might be useful to you—and/or consider how the practices you are drawn to—whether cooking, art, yoga, exercise, science, etc.—might have some parallel insights for such a time as this.

Along these lines, I'm reminded of a quote from the Islamic Sufi poet Hafiz, "**Fear is the cheapest room in the house. I would like to see you living in better conditions.**" Now, don't get me wrong. We can reasonably be *appropriately afraid* of this novel Coronavirus — fearful either for ourselves or on behalf of others who are especially vulnerable to it. But what I am cautioning against is being unduly, unnecessarily, and additionally afraid and anxious in ways that make the situation worse than it has to be—all those second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and more *optional* arrows that we all sometimes keep shooting into ourselves.

To paraphrase a recent recommendation from Jack Kornfield on Tim Ferris's podcast, try *telling your anxieties and fears, **thank you for trying to protect me, but I'm ok right now.*** And take a few moments to pause, be grateful, and savor all the ways that statement *is* true for yourself or those closest to you. Even if there are real

problems, **what are the ways that you—and those you love—are ok right now in this present moment?**

For such a time as this, remember what we've talked about before regarding *Buddha's Brain*. Our brains have evolved to be "like teflon for good experiences and velcro for bad experiences." Our brains have the fixating on bad things part covered. So try to gently remind yourself from time to time to intentionally savor all that remains good with you, with others around you, and with this world.

Even if just for the moment, be in the present as it actually is. As the Buddha said, "Not reviving the past, not hoping to be in the future. Instead, with insight, see each arising state. Not craving after past experience, nor setting one's heart on future ones. Not bound up in desire or craving." *Just this*: just this moment as it actually is.

Beyond what the world is already hitting you with, if you find yourself beginning to shoot that second or third (or more) optional arrows into yourself, try gently asking yourself, "**Is this thought serving me?**" There is great liberation in realizing that, "You don't have to believe everything you think!"

Although I can't tell you exactly what the coming days will bring, I can promise you that, "*This too shall pass.*" Again, in the words of the Buddha, "Whatever has the nature to arise, has the nature to pass away." We can't stop the waves of change and impermanence from coming, but we can learn to surf!

And we do not have to figure it out alone. I am so grateful to be together with you all this morning. And I am grateful to be on this journey with all of you.

Practice letting go of what you *can't* change.

Support your immune system: get enough sleep, eat healthy, drink fluids, exercise, spiritual practices (meditation, yoga, practice lovingkindness, etc.) and/or other activities that help you manage stress.

Focus on what you *can* change.

- What reality-based problems do I need to solve today?
- When is the best time of day for me to read the news to update myself?
- How can I be a resource to others without becoming over-responsible for them?
 - Kathleen Smith, therapist in D.C., "20 Questions to Help with COVID-19 Anxiety"

Schedule activities *unrelated* to Coronavirus!

- Spend time outside every day (and/or other activities that put you into "flow")
- Wendell Berry, "The Peace of Wild Things"

For Further Study

Pema Chödrön, When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times

Jen Raffensperger, Intern Minister

Chalice Lighting

“Pandemic” by The Rev. Lynn Ungar, who serves as the Minister for Lifelong Learning at the UU Church of the Larger Fellowship. As we begin, I invite you to light a chalice or candle near you, and speak the words “The Chalice is lit here.”

Spoken Meditation

Earlier this week I had cause to look up Rumi’s poem “The Guest House.” The reason I looked it up had nothing to do with our current pandemic, but as I read it again, I felt settled in heart and mind. Maybe you know this poem already, but please take a moment to close your eyes (if it’s comfortable to do so) and listen again - or anew!

“The Guest House”

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.
Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Right now, I feel like I’m being asked to share space with a lot of *uninvited* guests - worry, isolation, the eternal temptation of scrolling to the next article, and the next. And that’s without even considering the uninvited guest of the moment, COVID-19. And that’s without even considering all the guests that Rumi names, the ones that show up and keep coming, whether we are sick or well, whether we are alone or together.

When I think of the idea of a guide from beyond, what comes to mind for me is the way the protective measures we are being asked to take are not for ourselves alone. On a grand, global scale we are invited to care for one another - to take care of those of us most at risk by limiting our exposure to one another. Perhaps we are cleaning out the house literally - and perhaps we can take a moment to do it figuratively. Perhaps while we are home, giving space to our most vulnerable neighbors and the dedicated health

professionals caring for those already ill, perhaps we can imagine a world together where we act in the interests of others. Welcome and entertain thoughts about a new world we can begin to glimpse, where public health makes us better neighbors, better friends, better humans. Meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Chalice Extinguishing

Be the guests in one another's hearts.

Make space for joy, strength, and compassion.

Be the light in the lantern that comforts your fellow travelers.

Carry the flame within.

Please extinguish your home chalice with the words, "I carry the flame."