

LEANING INTO THE LIGHT

Roshi Joan Halifax

Upaya Zen Center

January, 2007

This is the first time in the history of the earth that major threats to planetary survival stem from our human behavior. We can mechanically solve certain kinds of problems, but technology cannot heal our deluded mind, and for many, technology feeds our delusions. Looking deeply, we see that only wisdom and compassion can solve delusions. How can we have the energy and commitment, the aspiration and inspiration to develop qualities of mind and heart that will nourish a sane and balanced world?

His Holiness the Dalai Lama once remarked that tigers look scary; He reminded us that mostly human beings look smart. He then asked us: who causes more destruction?

This reminds me of a Koan:

The Book of Serenity, Case 12

The Main Case

Dizang asked Xiushan, "Where do you come from?"

Xiushan said, "From the South."

Dizang said, "How is Buddhism in the South these days?"

Xiushan said, "There's extensive discussion."

Dizang said, "How can that compare to me here planting the fields and making rice to eat?"

Xiushan said, "What can you do about the world?"

Dizang said, "What do you call the world?"

The world is at risk; we are the world. The renowned humanist Vaclav Havel once said that morality means taking responsibility, not only of your life, but for the life of the world. From a Buddhist perspective, it means seeing yourself as not separate from all beings and things and acting accordingly.

One way that this insight is expressed is through engaged Buddhism, which is a contemplative approach to human service, social action and the details of our daily living. Roshi Bernie Glassman articulates the Three Tenets of Not Knowing, Bearing Witness, and Compassionate Action as a basis for a spirituality that is engaged with the suffering of life. He further speaks about the Five course meal: spirituality, study, livelihood, social action, and community as media for inspiration and transformation.

We can ask then, how can inspiration make it possible for us to *actualize* compassionate action in the world? How can we engage the suffering of others with clarity, steadiness and authentic compassion? What makes it possible for us to go through suffering and to find meaning in the midst of catastrophe? How is it that suffering can give rise to profound inspiration? And why is it that leaders who have suffered can exemplify qualities of wisdom and compassion that make “spiritual democracy” realizable and be a great source of inspiration for others?

In the presentation, we will explore the Life of King Ashoka of India, as a model of inspired leadership. Ashoka was the grandson of Chandragupta – the founder of the Mauryan dynasty – and the son of Bindusara. He came to the throne around 268 B.C.E. and died approximately 233 B.C.E. He is known primarily from his the “Legend of Ashoka” and his rock and pillar inscriptions found in various parts of India.

His edicts offer us important information about his reign and policies. After eight years of rule, Ashoka waged a terrible war against the kingdom of Kalinga (Orissa today) and was so horrified by the carnage he had caused that he gave up violence and turned to Buddhism. His transformation process is fascinating for us to consider.

Ashoka's edicts are primarily concerned with the powerful reforms he instituted and the ethical principles, which he recommended in his attempt to create a just and humane society. We will look at some of

the policies instituted by Ashoka and how they reflect compassion and depth of character, and also how they are sourced in an experience of inspiration born from delusion and suffering.

Another powerful role model who exemplifies a transformation of character is Nelson Mandela. Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said about Mandela: The crucible of suffering made him great. He was not this way before he went to prison. He had no great capacity for empathy.

In Buddhism, we use the image of the lotus in muddy water as an example of the transformation of human suffering and delusion into inspiration and enlightenment. This transformation process is about engendering fundamental and radiant unselfishness, a state of mind and heart that is based in a worldview that is conducive to seeing “reality” clearly.

Seeing reality clearly means at least to see that we are not separate from all beings and things, and thus the suffering of seemingly others is our suffering as well. This is about the development of Bodhicitta, according to Buddhism, a heart that is engaged.

So we endeavor to realize the Bodhisattva ideal and vows and to develop characteristics of a dharmic personality. This requires the integration of love and necessity, according to James Hillman. In Buddhism, this is done through the Bodhisattva practice of the paramitas, which include generosity, virtue, patience, wholeheartedness, mindfulness, and wisdom. The paramitas are flavors within the body of inspiration.

Archbishop Tutu also reminds us that our humanity is tied into humanity; we can only be human together. Rabbi Zalman Schachter puts it another way: The only way to get it together is together.

This sense of the existence of the great web of life is activated through the experience of going deeply within, developing an interior life,

nurturing the capacity to see reality clearly, and having the deep aspiration toward fundamental unselfishness which in essence means to benefit others. These qualities and processes are the heart of inspiration.