



'Choice in every moment' by Anja Tanhane

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*'The clarity of a joyful mind,
The openness of a compassionate heart,
Freedom from self through mindfulness,
The gentleness of letting be.'*

These are the aspirations I formulated for my Zen practice a few years ago. I have just returned from a four day Zen retreat, I'm listening to Coldplay, and outside in the garden, after a morning of hail and rain, the birds are singing. 'At any moment you have a choice, that either leads you closer to your spirit or further away from it,' writes the great Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, and I am aware of my cluttered mind, my love of music, the flux of openness and cold-heartedness I present to the world in my daily life.

The clarity of a joyful mind

Using functional magnetic resonance imaging, scientists can now watch the brain during meditation, follow signals being sent across the brain, observe the difference in various types of meditations. In bare attention meditation, the activity in the attention association of the brain is increased, the right parietal lobe activity decreases as the boundary between self and the environment is dissolved, the hippocampus and the amygdala are stimulated, modifying the activity of the nervous system. Verbal and conceptual association areas are switched off, and a peaceful state, triggered by the parasympathetic (resting) nervous system, is followed by an activation of the alert sympathetic nervous system, leading to a mentally clear state. Meditation changes the pathways in the brain over time, such as increasing activity in the left pre-frontal cortex, where joy and optimism reside. One of the practices in the Ordinary Mind Zen School consists of labelling thoughts during meditation. When the mind wanders off and I become aware of this, I label the type of thought - 'planning mind', 'fantasising mind', 'anxious mind'. After doing this more than a hundred times during a retreat, I become a little tired of these repetitive thought patterns churning endlessly through my head. I realise that what I regard as thoughts, *my* 'precious' thoughts, are often little more than background music. Clear thinking is important, our intelligence is precious. But much of what our brain churns out in the course of a day is neither important nor valuable.

Hakuin Zenji, in his 'Song of Zazen', writes,

*Boundless and free is the sky of samadhi
Bright the full moon of wisdom,
Truly, is anything missing now
Nirvana is right here before our eyes.*

The openness of a compassionate heart

Some years ago I was working in a public hospital, where one of the staff members didn't like me very much and sometimes took the opportunity to make cutting comments about me in front of others. Talking to her, trying to find out if I'd caused her some offence, didn't seem to help. Naturally I didn't like her very much, and didn't enjoy being in meetings with her. Her voice seemed hard to me, with an edge, and I was relieved when I realised that others were finding her a bit hard to get along with as well. One day, as she was talking in a meeting about something unrelated to me, I took a few moments to become mindful of my body as she talked. I sensed a hard and constricted pain in the centre of my chest, which seemed to be reflected in her voice. I felt sad for her, having to live with this pain. After this, I found my response to her was much more neutral, and I could talk in a normal voice to her without being defensive or trying to please her. I thought it would be terrible to go through life bristling with aggressive spikes, jabbing those around you.

I do not want to excuse bad behaviour, but I do believe it cannot lead to real joy and contentment, and that an aggressive life is, deep down, a wasted life. We probably all have it within us to do terrible things. What would it take to turn me into someone I would hardly recognise? Our sense of morality lives in the central pre-frontal lobe, and damage to that part, not uncommon after a traumatic brain injury, can sometimes leave people unable to make moral judgments. Severe trauma can distort our capacity for compassionate action, as can starvation, pain, fear, the survival instinct, and propaganda.

Freedom from self through mindfulness

I am aware that I do not like living my life on automatic pilot, yet I am curiously reluctant to give myself whole-heartedly to each moment. There must be a tremendous perceived benefit to ourselves in living a distracted life, that we need to practise so assiduously to glimpse even moments of 'just being'. 'Freedom from self' means freedom from the small ego, which thinks it needs to protect itself and build a Fort Knox against the outside world. When Thich Nhat Hanh says that at any moment we have a choice, leading us closer to our spirit or further away from it, it is in these moments that we can let go of our self-centered preoccupations and realise that we are neither particularly special nor particularly un-special. Like every other being, we exist in our interdependent relationships. In Western society, catch phrases such as 'the sky is the limit' and 'you can do anything you want, if you put your mind to it', are very popular. They are patently untrue, yet to say this may be perceived as limiting the potential humans are capable of. People who are driven, who are high achievers, are sometimes unbalanced in other areas of their lives. As in all aspects of Buddhism, the intention behind our action, in this case ambitious behaviour, is what determines the positive and negative effects it has on our lives. Ambition born of a desire to fulfill ones

potential, to allow the gifts we have been given to flower in order to benefit others (for example, by performing music skillfully and beautifully), may lead to an ennobling of character. Ambition for the sake of ego just wanting to be better than others, can shine brightly with a hollow emptiness at its centre. We yearn to be connected, but we are also afraid of the vulnerability this implies. One example is a possessive husband who is terrified that his wife, whom he wants to open his heart to, might leave him. There are men who would rather put their wives repeatedly in hospital after severe beatings than admit to themselves that, in the end, our small egos have no real control over our lives. This is an extreme example, but we are all possessive husbands of those parts of ourselves we wish to keep safe and secure. 'Life is dukkha', says the Buddha, it is impermanent, it involves suffering. 'It's true', we can say intellectually, but in our hearts continue to yearn for the easy way out. Surely there must be a way that I can be happy and also cling to some of my delusions at least?

The gentleness of letting be

It sounds simple, living your life with gentleness. Yet people who are excessively focused on being gentle all the time can be prone to depression, passivity, and passive/aggressive behaviours. Sometimes they come across as not being quite real in the way they present themselves to us, and we wonder what might happen if their boundaries were threatened. There are also times when we need to be forceful, to take a strong stance in our life.

Yet even at times when no force is required, such as when I plant out seedlings or chop some vegetables for dinner, I can find myself being impatient and irritated, approaching my task with the delusion that it needs to be 'dealt' with so I can move on to the next one.

*Lord, my mind is not noisy with desires,
and my heart has satisfied its longing.*

*I do not care about religion,
or anything that is not you.*

*I have soothed and quieted my soul,
like a child at its mother's breast.*

*My soul is as peaceful as a child
sleeping in its mother's arms*

Psalm 131