

Notes - Keeping a Bright Heart in Dark Times – October 26, 2019

Intro: From a Buddhist (Mahayana) perspective all humans have innate clarity and good heart. What obscures that nature are fixation on thoughts, sensations and emotions - particularly anger, fear, helplessness, overwhelm, attachment, incomprehension/confusion. This happens constantly, but most noticeably when we feel threatened physically, emotionally, or in identity. Our human survival mechanism is also hard-wired to respond to such perceived threats with fight, flight, or freeze. But these rigid responses aimed at self-preservation also contract us and cut us off from our deeper innate resources of spaciousness, clear seeing, and expansive heart. Buddhist insights and practices support choosing alternatives to the unconscious and misinformed habit of seeking safety and protection in ways that ultimately do not free us from suffering.

Buddhist Insights into the way things are: answers to the questions

What is the cause of suffering? Is it possible to be free from suffering? If so, what is the source of true happiness and freedom? What can I do to really be of benefit to other people? Why do people do harmful things to others?

Four Buddhist-based practices that protect our minds-hearts and open us to innate wisdom

Motivation/Intention/Aspiration: where are you headed?

Motivation/intention/aspiration are regarded as a tangible type of action in Buddhism which influences what happens on many levels. We usually are on automatic pilot about awareness of our motivation, intention or aspiration. Thus we are unconsciously enacting motivations, unexamined ones conditioned by our culture, families, and misperceptions of the way things are. Become aware of motivation/intention/aspiration. Connect more deeply to your heart and mind, and decide on a beneficial intention. Then consciously make it bigger, brighter, and closer to the way you truly want to be as a human being in the community of life.

"May I...."

Rituals and reminders for connecting with aspiration.

Calm abiding meditation (single-pointed focus; shamatha)

Focusing the mind on a single object so as to avoid distraction and to allow natural calm and clarity to arise.

Bodhicitta; Self-compassion; Compassion

The power of beneficial vow; the truth of interbeing; the poignancy of our common human dilemma; absolute and relative compassion; the aspiration and action of compassion; never giving up on ourselves.

Receiving compassion via benefactors/symbol; holding our suffering; meditative aspiration prayers

Recognizing identification with thoughts and emotions

Being on the riverbank (witnessing); being the sky not the clouds (space of being/knowing)

Practice advice: The good news is the mind and heart can be trained; the bad news is you have to do it. In my experience it is helpful to find a balance in practice between honestly turning towards the truth and pain of the way things are (as we experience them) and cultivating the capacity to be present to suffering in a way that is workable, beneficial and sustainable over time. Heartfelt aspiration and compassion are key to this balance.

Four Immeasurables Prayer of Bodhicitta

May all beings have happiness, and the causes of happiness;

May all be free from sorrow, and the causes of sorrow;

May all never be separated from the sacred happiness which is sorrowless;

And may all live in boundless equanimity, without attachment and without aversion.