

Suffering and Compassion

by Lisa Hoffman

I didn't like the first lesson I heard from my Buddhist teacher.

Her name is Darlene Cohen, and I was part of a meditation workshop she was giving called *Suffering and Delight*.

"What can you trust?" She had just asked us.

Various answers were offered: your intuition, your intellect, your mother, your spiritual teacher.

Darlene said: "You can trust the present moment to be exactly as it is."

I bristled. I did not like present moment at that point, in 1995. I was in severe chronic pain caused by injuries to my neck, shoulders, elbows and wrists. I wasn't sure if I would be able to continue working.

Why should I trust the present moment when it was full of so much suffering?

I looked at Darlene more closely. I had expected a tall, lean, bald Buddhist nun when I signed up for the workshop at San Francisco Zen Center. Before me was a short, soft woman with shoulder length gray hair dressed in a hippie-flavored purple skirt and gauzy flowered blouse.

And I found out that Darlene also lived with constant pain. It was from rheumatoid arthritis that had developed more than 25 years ago, in her mid-30s -- my age in 1995. She had been bedridden for the first two years, immobilized by pain and debilitation, eventually having both hips and one knee replaced. Her hands were gnarled, and she moved around the workshop room with a slow limp.

This woman knew a thing or two about suffering. She writes in her book, Turning Suffering Inside Out: "As my body got weaker and my pain greater, and I could no longer deny my situation, I realized that this is the life I have been given. This is the body I have to live the rest of my life with... Strangely, I found relief in just being the suffering. Because I was so ill, nothing was demanded of me: no function, no performance, no self-sufficiency, no heroics. Just me living and breathing."

Although I didn't like what she'd said, some part of me responded beyond the bristling. I knew it was true. Whether the present moment holds suffering, delight or both at once, it will be as it is -- and that *can* be trusted.

Buddhism teaches that to live this life -- to love, achieve, lose, grow old -- is to know heartbreak. Suffering is a mark of existence -- a fundamental truth.

Is anyone who touches your life suffering now? Are you?

I came to Darlene's Suffering and Delight workshop to find peace from the chronic physical pain and anguish that overwhelmed me. I wanted to overcome my fear that I would have to stop working. I wanted to let go of the grief I felt about all that I had already lost -- most of what I loved to do with my hands. Cooking. Writing. Applauding an artist.

Enough with the Suffering -- I wanted the Delight.

But what we get is both. Sometimes separately, sometimes together. One is never very far from the other. Committing to meditation means committing to life as it is now. It means suffering when that is the moment. It means joy when that is the moment. Sinking into meditation means sinking into life as it is today.

In 1995, that meant sinking into the overwhelming physical pain and related emotions. I did this when meditating, and in day-to-day life. I feared drowning in the experience, and at times I felt that was happening. But something else was holding me -- the tender roots of a fledgling meditation practice, a beginning relationship with Darlene and other Zen students.

"How do you learn to acknowledge your suffering?" Darlene writes. "I think it lies in practicing respect for all your feelings... You must develop your capacity to appreciate each thing as it is now, while inundated with suffering... When you are able to give all your feelings your full attention, without believing that one feeling is good and another bad (even if you think it is), then compassion, irritation, pain, hatred and joy are all sacred."

The simplicity of it astounded me: pain and turmoil came up and passed. They arose and melted away again. And again. I did not drown. In fact, I felt more energy, and at times delight, than I had in a very long while.

Darlene teaches that even when suffering is at its most intense, there are delights to also experience. No matter how I feel, great pleasure is unfailing when my purring cat curls up in my lap and falls asleep. Or when I have a steaming cup of English breakfast tea with cream and honey. This is not pleasure that needs to be pursued -- just noticed. And somehow noticing suffering seems linked to noticing joy.

Compassion and suffering are also deeply intertwined. Being with my own suffering woke up compassion -- for me, and for others. The ability to simply listen and be with people when their hearts were aching increased, and the need to solve all their problems began to fade. The feeling of connectedness, and compassion, grew.

Darlene writes about connection and "... the towering importance of our relations with our spouses, our children, our parents, our coworkers, even our relations with... the people we pass on the street,... the person auditing us for the IRS, the driver who cuts us off on the freeway -- or the driver we cut off. Everybody counts! ...all these people are our teachers. Each encounter is an opportunity to receive the teaching of compassion, to be suddenly stuck with the

interconnectedness of all life. If we practice encounter in such a thoroughgoing way compassion naturally develops."

What is compassion? Quan Yin is China's goddess of compassion, and in Zen is called Avalokiteshvara. They "hear the cries of the world." They bring healing by being with us all when we suffer, and suffering with us. Sounds suspiciously like meditation -- sitting with what is. Teachers and healing beings can take any form, as suggested by Darlene.

So, sit with that person whose heart is aching. When you are suffering, open to that experience, and open to that unexpected embodiment of Avalokiteshvara. Who knows? It might be the checkout person at Trader Joe's.

By the way, I have grown rather fond of that first lesson from Darlene.

Lisa Hoffman is an ordained Zen priest through the Russian River Zendo. She is also a nonprofit consultant with 25 years of experience, and a cat lover, believing that all cats are reincarnated Zen masters. lisa@lisahoffman.net. Press control asked click office button

10-06