

Is There a Buddhist Heaven?

by Lisa Hoffman

My sweet cat has cancer. What seemed like an innocent bump on Mitzi's leg was removed, biopsied and diagnosed as rare and malignant. My vet recommended amputation, a shocking choice.

What could be heavenly about such a situation?

The Buddha taught the four Heavenly Abodes as practices to open the heart with love and generosity to life as it unfolds and people as they are. The practices are lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. For me, their common denominator is unfailing connection -- including everyone and everything in my experience, even people I dislike or who have caused me pain.

And as I cried my eyes out over Mitzi's sudden health crisis, heaven *was* all kinds of connection. I turned to friends, family, and my Cat people, an online community I have created over time, and received kind and unconditional support. Some people e-mailed stories of happy and well-adjusted three legged kitties. One friend and colleague told me about adopting a cat who needed a back leg amputated. As the cat recovered, the family dog was observed to push the food bowl over to her and lick her to encourage her to eat. Others shared choices they had made to let beloved and sick pets live out their natural lives and let them go when it was time.

I felt held by lovingkindness -- wishes of well-being for me, and for Mitzi. I decided not to have my cat's leg amputated, and the outpouring continued. I felt especially moved by people who disagreed with my choice, and acknowledged and supported it. I find it easy to practice lovingkindness with those I am close to and feel good about. It's harder to feel good wishes toward people I find difficult, or who have done something I strongly disagree with. Yet, it is most transforming -- for me and I hope others -- to offer lovingkindness indiscriminately. I don't need to deny difficult relationships or passionate disagreements with politicians, but I can also genuinely wish well-being and happiness to all. Such lovingkindness is the Buddha way.

In her book *Lovingkindness*, Sharon Salzberg describes this practice as "the ability to embrace all parts of ourselves, as well as all parts of the world. Practicing metta [lovingkindness] illuminates our inner integrity because it relieves us of the need to deny different aspects of ourselves."

As my friends, family and Cat people reached out, I also felt enfolded in compassion, which is the second Heavenly Abode. Compassion is described as simply being with suffering and those who suffer. It is not about trying to change or fix anything. Cynthia, a close friend, has lost two of her four siblings in the last several years -- a sister to breast cancer, and a brother to stroke. I asked her how Joan, her 82-year-old mother, had survived such devastating loss, and she suggested that I ask her mom. And I did, one day when the two of us were alone in her apartment one sunny afternoon. "I really don't know," Joan said, slowly shaking her head. I could feel the grief in her heart and just sat with her quietly. What can any of us do under such circumstances but sit together, heart-to-heart?

"A compassionate heart... arises from seeing the truth of suffering an opening to it," writes Salzberg. "Out of this arises a sense of purpose, a sense of meaning so strong in our lives that no matter what the circumstances, no matter what the situation, our goal or our greatest desire to any moment is to express genuine love."

The tears I shed for Mitzi were also for a year of losses and illness. One of my closest friends, Debra, died of ovarian cancer about a year ago. My dharma brother Marvin died of a heart attack about 10 months ago. My mother, Audrey, survived her own bout of cancer, and my teacher Darlene has been dealing with ovarian cancer for more than two years, another friend needed brain surgery, and yet another friend had a cancer scare. My friends knew this, and wordlessly held me when the feelings became overwhelming. I know it was painful for them -- I'm not someone who cries or falls apart easily -- but compassion grounded them and me.

I have noticed that the act of simply being with someone who is hurting creates an intimate bond that is less likely to happen if I try to fix or take the hurt away. I compassion as a practice of respect, an acceptance of life as it is, even when that means deep sorrow. There is often a misunderstanding of Nirvana as a kind of heaven where there is no pain or loss or harm. But my studies and experience of the Buddha's teachings point to Nirvana as that moment of crying over Mitzi and the year's losses and being comforted and supported by people I trust. The grief of loss and the beauty of love at the same moment. Nirvana is much richer than nothing "bad" ever happening again.

The Buddha's Heavenly Abode teachings are similarly rich. The third is sympathetic joy, rejoicing in the good fortune of others. I find sympathetic joy practice happy, maddening, and humbling. It is full of ease when I am full of ease, when I feel secure, when I am celebrating someone with whom I have an uncomplicated relationship. Under such circumstances, the pleasure arises and is easy to express with relish.

But, if I am feeling insecure or competitive, joy doesn't arise quite so neatly because there isn't much room. Earlier in my Buddhist practice, I figured that hours of meditation and studying the Buddha's wisdom would eliminate nasty feelings like jealousy. But as awareness deepened, my experience was opposite. I was horrified -- these "negative" feelings actually seemed stronger! What kind of Buddhist was I?

I am still not sure what the answer to that question is. But I have needed to practice compassion with myself, to make room for wholeness, for my entire experience of life, including jealousy and insecurity. And as I have meditated with my own humanity, room has also opened up for others. It is possible to feel joy for a colleague's success with a twinge (okay, sometimes more than a twinge...) of envy. Welcoming this rich and complex range of emotional experience has also unleashed tremendous energy and happiness. Nothing needs to be left out. And because nothing is denied or stuck, emotion arises and passes naturally. I have noticed that insecurity hangs around much longer if I feel it is unacceptable. If it is simply one part of my emotional landscape, it swiftly dissipates.

It is easy to imagine an internal roller coaster with the Heavenly Abode practices, which connect us to others, love, joy, our own foibles, and, at times, the depths of suffering. The fourth Heavenly Abode is equanimity, which is described by Robert Aiken-Roshi as radical acceptance, which cultivates stability. The ground underneath this stability is the deep understanding that life will be as it is, calling us to meet each moment completely. The four Heavenly Abodes nurture such a ground of being.

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