

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
Arlington Street Church
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**The Less Full of Ourselves We Are,
the More Room there is for Others**

-Lama Surya Das

“We are visitors on this planet.” His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama is speaking. “We are here for ninety ... a hundred years at the very most. During that [time], we must try to do something good, something useful with our lives. Try to be at peace with yourself, and help others share that peace. If you contribute to other people’s happiness, you will find the ... goal, the true meaning of life.”

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That’s the whole sermon! Here’s the commentary:

One of the central teachings of Tibetan Buddhism is the directive to put ourselves in another person’s place. This is a way to build the muscle of empathy and compassion. To put ourselves in another’s place is way easier said than done.

We begin with our heart. Breathing in, we soften our recalcitrant, hardened heart. Breathing out, we open our heart. You can try it with me. Breathing in, we soften. Breathing out, we open. With this practice, we experience our capacity for unconditional caring and generosity. Breathing in, soften. Breathing out, open.¹

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I don’t want to.

I don’t want to have anything to do with people who are fearful and angry and hateful. I don’t.

But that isn’t a viable option, isn’t an option with which we can *live*. In his poem *September 1, 1939*, the poet W.H. Auden wrote, in part,

¹ Lama Surya Das, *Awakening the Buddha Within*, p. 161

Waves of anger and fear
 Circulate over the bright
 And darkened lands of the earth,
 Obsessing our private lives....

I and the public know
 What all schoolchildren learn,
 Those to whom evil is done
 Do evil in return....

We must love one another or die.”²

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Breathing in, we soften our recalcitrant, hardened heart. Breathing out, we open our heart. Breathing in, soften. Breathing out, open.

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Lama Surya Das writes, “For centuries, the learned practitioners of Tibet have used [this powerful and advanced practice] as a way of loosening up ... freeing-up, ... and dissolving the barriers between self and others by transforming self-centered attitudes.... When [we] replace self-concern with a concern for others, [we build our] character and refine [our] spirituality.... [When we] change [our] point of view ... we change the entire atmosphere.... The less full of ourselves we are, the more room there is for others.”³

In the book our Buddhist reading group here just finished reading, Jack Kornfield tells this story:

“Once, on the train from Washington to Philadelphia, I found myself seated next to a man ... who’d [quit his job with the State Department] ... to run a rehabilitation program for juvenile offenders in the District of Columbia. Most of the [young people] he worked with were gang members who had committed homicide.

“One fourteen year old ... in his program had shot and killed an innocent teenager to prove himself to his gang. At the trial, the victim’s mother sat impassively silent until the end, when the youth was convicted of

² W.H. Auden, “September 1, 1939,” from *Another Time*

³ Das, *op cit*, pp. 161-162

the killing. After the verdict was announced, she stood up slowly, ... stared directly at him, and stated, 'I'm going to kill you.' Then the [boy] was taken away to [do time] in the juvenile facility.

"After the first half year, [this] mother of the slain child went to visit his killer. He had been living on the streets before the [murder,] and she was the only visitor he'd had. For a time they talked, and when she left, she gave him [a little] money....

"Then she started ... to visit him more regularly, bringing food and small gifts. Near the end of his three-year sentence, she asked him what he would be doing when he got out. He was confused and very uncertain.... She offered to help set him up with a job at a friend's company.

"Then she inquired about where he would live.... He had no family.... She offered him temporary use of the spare room in her home.

"For eight months he lived there, ate her food, and worked at the job. Then one evening, she called him into the living room to talk. She sat down opposite him and waited....

"Do you remember when I said I was going to kill you?"

"I'll never forget [it," he said].

"Well, I did,' [she said].

"I did not want the boy who could kill my son for no reason to remain alive on this earth. I wanted him to die. That's why I started to visit you and bring you things. That's why I got you the job and let you live here in my house.... And that ... boy ... *he's gone*.

"So now I want to ask you, since ... that killer is gone ... [and] my son is gone, ... if you'll stay here....

"I'd like to adopt you....'

“And [so] she became the mother ... he never had.... [She became] the mother of her son’s killer.”⁴

Imagine!

Breathing in, we soften our recalcitrant, hardened heart. Breathing out, we open our heart. Breathing in, soften. Breathing out, open.

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William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*; Portia is speaking to Shylock:

The quality of mercy is not strain’d
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath; it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes.⁵

American Tibetan nun Pema Chödrön calls this “sharing the heart.” “The essence of this practice is that when we encounter pain in our life, we breathe into our heart with the recognition that others also feel this. It’s a way of acknowledging when we are closing down, and of training to open up. When we encounter any pleasure or tenderness in our life, we cherish that and rejoice. Then we make the wish that others could also experience this delight or this relief.

“In a nutshell, when life is pleasant, think of others. When life is [difficult], think of others. If this is the only training we ever remember to do, it will benefit us tremendously, and everyone else as well. It’s a way of bringing whatever we encounter on to the path of awakening....

She continues, “Even the simplest of things can be the basis of this practice – a beautiful morning, a good meal.... Although there are many such ... ordinary, ... fleeting moments in our days, we usually speed right past them. We forget what joy they can bring. So the first step is to stop, notice, and appreciate what is happening.... Then we think of someone who is suffering, and wish that [they] could have this pleasure to sweeten up [their] life.”

⁴ Jack Kornfield, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry*, pp. 235-236

⁵ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 4, scene 1, pp. 180-187

“When we practice giving in this way, we don’t bypass our own pleasure. Say we’re eating a delicious strawberry. We don’t think, ‘Oh, I shouldn’t be enjoying this so much; other people ... [are hungry].’ We just fully appreciate the luscious fruit. Then we wish that [others] could [know such] pleasure. We wish that anyone who is suffering could experience such delight.

“Discomfort of any kind also becomes the basis for practice. We breathe in, knowing that our pain is shared; there are people all over the earth feeling just as we do right now. This simple gesture is a seed of compassion for self and other. If we want, we can go further. We can wish that a specific person or all beings could be free of suffering and its causes. In this way, our toothaches, our insomnia, ... our [fear] become our link with all humanity.”

Pema Chödrön concludes, “This simple way of training with pleasure and pain allows us to use what we have, wherever we are, to connect with [others]. It ... is what it will take to heal ourselves and our brothers and sisters [and cousins] on the planet.”⁶

Beloved spiritual companions, the less full of ourselves we are, the more room there is for others. Let us exercise the muscle of empathy and compassion, and so build our capacity for unconditional caring and generosity.

Breathing in, we soften our recalcitrant, hardened heart.

Breathing out, we open our heart.⁷

Breathing in, soften.

Breathing out, open.

Let us “try to be at peace with [ourselves], and help others share that peace. [When] we contribute to other people’s happiness, [we] will find the ... true meaning of life.”⁸

⁶ Pema Chödrön, *The Places That Scare You*, pp. 67-68

⁷ Das, *Awakening the Buddha Within*, *op cit*, p. 161

⁸ His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama