

Letting Go

Given 1/23/2011 by Christie Turner

Our Buddhist groups have been meeting for fifteen years and during that time have had many meaningful conversations. Today I wanted to share some findings and some stories for those who are in our groups.

Wes Nisker in his book entitled *Evolution as a Practical Guide to Enlightenment* states that "As they compare notes, scientists and Buddhist scholars alike have been astounded by the fact that the two ways of knowing (through introspection in meditation and through the scientific method) have arrived at so many similar conclusions. Physics is one arena where the two have found agreement. As impossible as it may seem to physicists who use sophisticated bubble chambers and laser photography to study subatomic events, Buddha had uncovered at least the basic principles of subatomic physics through meditation practices. Meditation can reveal that there is no solidity anywhere, that the observer cannot be separated from the observed, that phenomena seem to appear out of emptiness, and that everything affects everything else in a co-emergent system that scientists have only recently acknowledged and named "nonlocality". These truths have been discovered by many people who have focused inward.

Robert Thurman the Tibetan Buddhist scholar has said that Buddhism is an evolutionary sport. What could this mean? Evolutionary wisdom might be the deep realization of our nature as nature. We see ourselves as part of a larger whole. Buddha said I teach one thing and one thing only, suffering and the end of suffering. So how is it that having an experiential realization of who we are or maybe not who we are but how we are that relieves suffering?

So it turns out that freedom from suffering is the practice of letting go of the concepts which separate us both intellectually and also experientially from the natural world. Mary Oliver has a line in *Wild Geese* – "You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves."

I wanted to mention some of the latest in neuroscience research where there are many discoveries that again accord with Buddhist thought. For instance the discovery that meditators with well trained minds have a larger capacity for compassion in their prefrontal cortex. That the brain is composed of neural networks which continue to develop throughout the lifespan. That while aging almost always reduces the short term memory there are other kinds of intelligence such as the ability to see large patterns and to adapt to change that continue to improve. And in the realm of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, the discovery of methods for healing trauma which take advantage of the brain's own wiring and bypass conscious thought. I am referring here to Peter Levine's work in Somatic Reexperiencing and EMDR. So those are the emerging new fields which confirm what the Dalai Lama said when he first met with neuroscientists many years ago. That the mind can change the brain. When he said it the assembled experts quickly assured him that it did not work that way. In their view at that time it was the brain that determines the mind not the other way around. Now research is confirming the Dalai Lama's position. it was now possible to document, for example, that loving-kindness meditation activates those portions of the brain that are directed relationally toward other sentient beings.

Here is how the Dalai Lama described it recently:

"consciousness is understood as a multifaceted matrix of events. Some of them are utterly dependent on the brain, and, at the other end of the spectrum, some of them are completely independent of the brain. There is no one thing that is the mind or soul." Herein we also see the fundamental Tibetan Buddhist understanding of consciousness at multiple levels: what the Buddhists called "gross consciousness" is now, in the modern context of dialogue with the cognitive sciences, brain- and body-dependent, while the more subtle levels of consciousness provide a metaphysics or ontology for karmic reincarnation without positing a personal mind or soul that is carried over from life to life. The possibility and capability of transforming negative emotions into compassion, love, and happiness are now being experimentally investigated, and the initial findings seem to clearly support the age old Buddhist conviction that the mind can, over the entire lifetime, exert causal powers over the body and even the patterns of the brain and its functions. Rather than being born with a set supply of brain neurons for life as had been assumed by a previous generation of researchers, sustained meditative practice confirms the capacity of the brain to add neurons to its arsenal (neurogenesis), which in turn aids in memory and other mental functions. The brain's plasticity is also confirmed in its capacity to reorganize itself to make up for the deprivation of any particular sense (e.g., sight or hearing).

Last but not least, there now appears to be evidence that human creatures are neurologically "wired" for compassion – as long affirmed by the Tibetan Buddhist tradition--and that it is certainly possible, through the appropriate meditative techniques, to be transformed into being more and more compassionate beings. In short, rather than being deterministic properties of the brain, the mind--and the mental practices that constitute them – is not only able to act causally on the brain, but is also capable of transforming the brain itself

First, the self is not a fixed entity but a dynamic process of relationships. Second, underneath the patina of different religions, people around the world have common moral intuitions. Third, people are equipped to experience the sacred, to have moments of elevated experience when they transcend boundaries and overflow with love. Fourth, God can best be conceived as the nature one experiences at those moments, the unknowable total of all there is.

So the new dialogue between science and religion is going to come from people who feel the existence of the sacred, but who think that particular religions are just cultural artifacts built on top of universal human traits. It's going to come from scientists whose beliefs overlap a bit with Buddhism.

So how does this relate to letting go or letting be? Well I want to talk about two of our members who were long time meditators. Both were founding members of our Buddhist groups at this fellowship. Mignon Bowen was a very classy lady who along with Duane lived a rich and meaningful life. She was a community college trustee very active here at the fellowship. She had raised three kids. And then one day she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Her daughter, Debra, who is a physician, really wanted her Mom to have chemo. But Mignon merely said no and relaxed into the knowledge that her life would soon end. She only lived five weeks. During that time here are some of her statements. From this perspective I cannot understand where prejudice comes from? It is so obvious that we are all here doing the best we

can. On the warm and sunny Saturday afternoon before she died, Mignon asked her family to bring her here to the amphitheater and sat up there in the back. We were struggling with growth issues at that time and there was some contention in the community (hard to believe, I know) Mignon said..."if everyone could see this place as I am seeing it now, there would be no pettiness" And then on my last visit with her...she said I cannot speak of this to my family because they will think I am glad to be leaving and it is not that at all. It is just that I am feeling blissful in the middle of the night. It is not something that is easy to express. The pain is there but that is not the main thing in my mind. She said everything is arising and ceasing and so beautiful...that is what is meant by everything is perfect as it is. So here was this friend of mind who was letting be in the most difficult circumstance. At the end hospice nurses placed her in a light coma to manage her pain. Her daughter Debra said that as she would turn her over in the bed that her mother would murmur. Thank you, darling, you are so sweet to me. So this peacefulness remained through the whole process.

Then there is Nancy Ross who just died six months ago. She too was diagnosed with an inoperable cancer and determined that rather than consume medical and family resources that she would simply stop eating and drinking. She was pleased that is the only word that describes it to know how she would end her life and she was curious about the process. She wanted to continue meditation and after one guided session she did not move for eight hours. She too was able to relax and let be what was happening. You yourself as much as anybody in the universe deserve your love and affection. She now began describing a state of drifting in awareness that had no content. The Buddha has described the natural state of mind as the clear light or expressive power of mind and that is what is there regardless of the thoughts, feelings, or external circumstances. It is radiant, peaceful and fearless. Nancy began to dwell in this way. Her smile was soft and warm and there was a gentle good humor. She determined that this then was the emptiness of mind that we had grappled to understand for so long. It did not seem to be vacant or a void. This spaciousness is variously described as sky like, completely open, limitless, immutable and completely free. Compassion arises naturally as there is no impediment to seeing the suffering of others and wishing them well. One of the last things that Nancy said to me was I am so lucky.

So we have these two exemplars to inspire us to keep working with the teachings and to develop this absolutely central tenet of letting go or letting be. Even though a sitting practice can be uncomfortable, annoying and downright agitating at times, we persevere in the hope that by learning to relax through these difficult states of mind that we like Nancy and Mignon would face the end of life with serenity and continue to feel compassion and open heartedness even as we lose our bodies.