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Applied Dharmology  
5/7/15  
Updated 5/30/16

“Those who give from themselves burn out.  
Those who give from the source are nourished in the giving.”

~Stephen Levine, *Who Dies?*

My practice is mainly in the Buddhist Theravadan tradition, though I have spent a bit of time at the San Francisco Zen Center and done a few one-day sits there. I do not believe in a deity, though I do note what seems to be a general benevolence in the universe (or in the portion of it that I can observe): when we sit, something good eventually happens rather than something bad. Things seem to fall into place. Joy and peace are experienced not infrequently.

I don't usually identify as a Buddhist per the occasional remarks of my main teacher, Howie Cohn, whose student I have been for 25 years. He now and then advises not being a “Buddhist” or even a “meditator,” but just being awake—relaxing into this very moment with wakefulness and making room for whatever our experience is. Howie reminds us frequently not to let our minds leave our bodies, and to practice kindness and love.

My highest aspirations are to see clearly and act with kindness. I believe that the first (sooner or later) leads naturally to the second. My aspiration as a caregiver is in line with those aspirations—I believe that my task is to be awake and present with others, as well as kind and friendly, though I believe that awareness itself is the ultimate healing and purifying force.

After sitting in meditation each day, I usually take the Three Refuges in this manner: “I take refuge in the Buddha: the capacity to be aware and awake. I take refuge in the dharma: the way things actually are—the truth. I take refuge in the sangha: the qualities of love, kindness and compassion that connect us all, and in the community of practitioners—friends and supporters to one another.” The Three Refuges are probably the very center of my belief structure. I believe that the very awareness through which we perceive *anything*, including something that is horrible, is a reliable refuge. The Four Foundations of Mindfulness are therefore also very close to the center of my belief structure.

The notion of enlightenment plays very little part in my dharmology. I am not aiming for a permanent state of enlightenment or liberation and also observe that this goal seems to cause a fair amount of straining and unhappiness for meditators I have encountered over the years. I believe that any moment in which I'm aware of being aware is a moment of enlightenment or liberation, and that I can potentially have many such moments in a given day, and that a day with more such moments feels more satisfying than a day with fewer such moments, but that it is only in this very moment that I'm awake or not. I'm not aiming for a future state of everlasting awakesness, but for wakefulness now, and now, and now.

I was very struck by the chaplain we met at San Quentin. I myself felt nurtured by her presence, as we sat together in a group and during the brief moments her attention was on me when I spoke with her later. She seemed not to be motivated by a personal sense of love or kindness, which may easily attach to this person rather than that person, and that she was consciously tapping into the universal expressions of love, generosity and compassion that connect us all in an impersonal sense. Whether I end up working as a chaplain or not, I would like to be able to be present in this way, without personal attachment.

I place great emphasis on the practice of generosity: to look into the eyes of a homeless person, to smile, to offer a couple of dollars, or to help a co-worker master a new procedure. When someone on the street asks me for money, it is my practice (almost always) to say “Yes.” Generosity is not about establishing who is helpful and who is in need of help, but flows naturally among us all according to what is needed at the moment and the ability to respond. We are many times the one to give, many times the one to receive.

I believe that only six things are occurring in any moment: sights, smells, tastes, sounds, physical sensations and/or mental processes. I do not believe in an enduring “I” who is the experiencer and notice that days where “I” am not doing anything—where things are happening, but “I” am not doing them—are much easier than days where “I” have to do this, that and the other, where “I” am very busy.

I believe we make our worlds with our thoughts, and thus much of our suffering, while, alas, having the exact opposite intention. We suffer because we believe the stories we tell ourselves about the past and the future: *My mother didn't really love me. I don't have enough money. If I lose my job, I'm too old to get another one and will end up homeless. How will I bear it when my parents die?* Quite often, the thought that makes us suffer is a very simple one: *Something's wrong!*

We suffer because we want what is impossible: for our perfect romance to last forever, for our loved ones to live always or to live again, for a second trip through childhood, for people to behave as we prefer and never to change. We suffer because we believe happiness can be found where it cannot, in a certain set of external conditions: through having a different body or partner or job or set of friends or hobby, or more resources, or a different condition of health. We suffer because we believe the thoughts that tell us happiness is to be found somewhere else rather than here and now, that affirm that of course we are miserable in our current situation: ill, unloved, alone, homeless, imprisoned, dying, poor, or simply preferring something else.

We suffer when we put a lot of energy into our own happiness, trying to get and retain something more or different. I believe that we do our best in every moment and that every single misguided action we take that results in suffering is undertaken innocently, out of love for ourselves and out of a correct and sincere wish for our own happiness. Happiness, I believe, is what we have before we go looking for it. I believe happiness is our natural condition, often experienced in abundance after we drop the idea that something is missing or needs to be some other way.

I believe that, as Howie emphasizes, any moment when we are attending to “the raw data of cognition” is a moment in which we cannot be lost in a story about the past or the future and thus

a moment of freedom. Lamentation regarding the past and anxieties about the future create a very large portion of our suffering (possibly all of it).

I understand spiritual suffering as what a person experiences when he or she doesn't have a way of thinking about life and events so as to see them as meaningful or forming part of an orderly whole.

More broadly, I have no idea why human beings experience suffering, joy, contentment, pleasure or anything else. Perhaps this is something that can be explained by biological evolution. Being not well educated there, I place this question in the same category as the large question of how the world began in the first place. Was there ever nothing at all? The idea of there once being nothing is disturbing to me: how did we get from nothing to something? But the idea of "forever" extending backward in time is also disturbing. In fact, I try to avoid pondering how it is that anything whatsoever is here because it makes me feel like I'm losing my mind. I'm not going to figure it out. In the end, I have to say, "I have no idea why there is something rather than nothing, but there are probably scientists who think they can explain it, and, in any event, it appears to be the case," and leave it at that. I think the comedian Sam Kinison was getting at this when he quoted God as asking, "*Where* did I say to build a water slide?!"

Somehow, via the unfolding of causes and conditions, here it all is. I believe in the lawful and impersonal unfolding of causes and conditions, that nothing whatsoever happens outside of that. Much appears mysterious because of the causes that are unknown to us, but I'm convinced that the unfolding is orderly, first through believing what my teachers have said, then verified by my own observation over the decades. I think some parts of the unfolding can be explained by psychology: my boss says my report was terrible; I feel anxious. Or by biology: there is the loud sound of an explosion; my body tenses.

As the myriad factors endlessly mutate, affecting each other, the eight worldly winds result: pleasure and pain, gain and loss, praise and blame, fame and disrepute (or worse, anonymity!). This helps me to hold unpleasant occurrences: Ah, my boss thinking I did a bad job on my report is blame. Some blame now and then is to be expected, as is some praise now and then. (I often think of the Zen saying, "Whichever of the two occurs, be patient." Something I regard as good has happened. It won't stay that way. Something I regard as bad has happened. It won't stay that way.) It is not a daily cornerstone of my beliefs, but I do think about the three characteristics fairly often: impermanence, selflessness, dissatisfaction.

Karma is not a big part of my conscious beliefs; nor are the Four Noble Truths, though I think about elements of the Noble Eightfold Path fairly often.

An image from Buddhism that is particularly meaningful to me is that of the Buddha under the bodhi tree, most particularly the moment when Mara tries to shake his self-confidence, after unsuccessfully trying to inspire aversion or craving in the Buddha. The Buddha touches the ground and says something like, "The very earth bears witness to my right to be here." I find this image tremendously moving. It speaks to me of the fragility of our sense of self-worth, how much we all want to feel that we belong and are wanted.

I believe that after we die, our bodies rot (or burn or are eaten), and our individual consciousness is absorbed into universal consciousness—that no trace of us as individuals remains, except in the memories of others and anything we may leave behind.

For several years in a row, I attended the annual concentration retreat at Spirit Rock and really enjoyed and appreciated the suppression of hindrances and feelings of profound tranquility. It also seemed that I gained perhaps one additional split second in which I could consider if the words I was about to speak or action I was about to take would be beneficial, so I'm glad for all of that practice. I am now a devotee of Sayadaw U Tejaniya (SUT), after attending a retreat taught in his style at Spirit Rock in April of 2014. One of our teachers explained that SUT's goal is to help students to practice mindfulness of mind (the third foundation of mindfulness) early on, rather than after a long apprenticeship spent focusing on the breath.

At the retreat, I appreciated the freedom from most of the normal schedule, with many fewer bells rung, and the instructions to decide for ourselves when to sit and when to walk, but to notice why we were doing what we were doing. That has carried powerfully into the rest of my life, along with other "why" questions that help to bring clarity to my motivations and values: Why am I going here? Why am I doing this task in this way? Why am I doing this task at all? Why do I own two of these? Why is the water running right now? Why do I want to be a chaplain? Why am I thinking of speaking certain words—what is my purpose?

SUT writes that if we focus on the breath (or whatever object), we will learn all about that object, but not about our minds, and that if we aim for a certain state, such as calmness, we may achieve and enjoy that state, but not learn about how factors work together to create what we experience, pleasant or unpleasant. His advice is not to focus in a determined manner, but to observe as continuously as possible in a relaxed way, to be aware of being aware, to observe our attitude toward objects, to come to understand how this thought leads to that visceral experience or to that utterance—how suffering is created by how we think, speak and act and how various factors affect each other for good or ill. SUT invites us to notice what is happening, why it's happening, and what happens next.

When I am having pronounced emotional difficulties, I find that the most helpful thing to do is to state my thoughts to myself in this form: "Having the thought that \_\_\_\_\_." This often relieves suffering immediately, as it makes it obvious that my thought is just a thought. Once I see the thought for what it is, I can't believe it wholeheartedly. Putting my attention on my body is my next step, noticing what my visceral experience is.

If distress persists over a number of days, I will eventually employ the practice of tonglen: breathing in all of the fear (for instance) in the world, wishing that I might take on the fear experienced by every person, and breathing out a wish for all beings to feel safe and protected. This is kind of a mental trick, as I see it, reminding me that all beings at one time or another suffer just as I am suffering, and imparting meaning, even nobility, to my experience. Finally, I may get to the point where I have to remember Phillip Moffitt's words: "Sometimes we just have to wait it out." It's not passing quickly (on my schedule). It's uncomfortable. I dislike it very much. It seems wrong, but it just is, and I will have to bear with it.

Vis a via chaplaincy, I believe that I am fundamentally the same as every other person in wanting to be happy, in too often having the deluded belief that acting from grasping or aversion will yield this result, in suffering due to my own wrong views and misguided actions. I believe that one of the greatest things I have to offer as a volunteer chaplain is my (intermittent) ability to be consciously present with clarity, openness and kindness. I understand that professional chaplains have a huge array of professional skills; considering specifically my own spiritual beliefs and how they can be used in chaplaincy, I see my duty as being to be awake in as many moments as possible, and I believe that when I am successful, this is nurturing to those I am with. I know from my own experience how it feels to be with someone who is calm, or joyful, or angry, or very agitated, or distracted. Possibly the loneliest feeling is to be with someone who is distracted, not really tuned in or interested.

Given that emotions are infectious to some extent—around an anxious person, I feel anxious—it is possible that when I am able to be with another person without being lost in thought, that person gets a taste of the spaciousness and openness that we all share, of the peace which I believe is the highest happiness and perhaps the highest healing, even if physical death occurs.

Two years before I found Howie, a friend gave me a copy of Stephen Levine's *Who Dies? A few months after receiving this gift, I bought three of his other books, including *Healing into Life and Death*, in which Levine writes of a patient who was "an example of someone who seemed to have healed in the most profound manner, though she didn't stay in her body—a heart that opened incredibly, a deepening wisdom and a sense of participation in life which broadened with each day." (One of Levine's books about death might be interesting and helpful reading for an aspiring chaplain. One patient speaks about the difference between being with a visitor who is uncomfortable with her illness versus one who does not need anything to be different.)*

In the GRIP class we visited at San Quentin, we received a card listing the characteristics of the moment of imminent danger, when violence becomes possible. One of the characteristics is that "everything speeds up." When I'm lost in a tangle of fearful or angry emotions, believing my thoughts, flailing about for words to speak or actions to take that I hope will relieve my distress instantly, things do seem speeded up. When I look directly at my experience, things slow down. The chaplain intern we met at San Quentin spoke explicitly about this. She said she may often have only a few seconds with an inmate, a very brief period in which to "feed" that person in some way. She said she does this by trying to "stretch time." She didn't explain specifically how she does this, but I will guess that it is by some practice of being consciously present: aware of being aware. I believe that our wakeful presence does feed others in some ineffable way, and that this is a primary thing a chaplain can offer.

One day I was sitting at the soup kitchen next to a guest and consciously placing my attention on my body, noticing what was being felt there. I didn't say anything at all to the guest directly (though he saw me interacting with others), and after a while, he said, "You're a nice lady. Thank you for letting me sit next to you." (This brief anecdote is a specific application of my dharmology to my volunteer chaplaincy.)

Besides conscious presence, I can also offer, per my own beliefs, the unspoken understanding that the person I'm caring for is not being punished for doing bad things, nor being punished by

God; nor is this person a bad person, somehow deserving of problems and sorrow. As I see my own life as an impersonal unfolding of causes and conditions, often influenced by my own incorrect ideas about how to gain happiness, I can thus understand the lives of those I care for, and have compassion for them.

My practice—and my teacher, Howie—invites me to turn toward my own distress, whether physical or emotional, rather than to run from it by telling myself a story about it, or seeking distraction in one of its many forms. Thinking about a problem may make it seem a lot worse and heighten unpleasant emotions correspondingly. Thus it may seem as if I'm really doing a lot of worthwhile, difficult emotional work, but what is really happening is a vicious circle of thoughts, emotions and physical sensations all making each other worse. Howie has quoted Ajahn Chah speaking of “the suffering that leads to more suffering” versus “the suffering that leads to the end of the suffering.” Believing my story about what is happening leads to more suffering.

When I turn directly toward my distress, I note my thoughts (“Having the thought that \_\_\_\_.”) rather than believing them, and I consciously focus on my physical experience. This is generally unpleasant. I feel vulnerable, soft, uncertain, but this is the suffering that leads to the end of suffering. The stories, besides distracting me from the actual experience, seem to impart meaning to what is happening, affording a comprehensible structure and framework. Sitting with just the visceral experience itself is disorienting mentally, as well as physically uncomfortable. However, this genuinely removes or at least erodes the causes of suffering rather than just suppressing or avoiding it.

So often I have had the experience of fearing that X is going to happen, telling myself I can't bear it if X happens, and getting more and more upset, until I remember my practice. Seeing the thought for what it is: “Having the thought that I won't be able to bear it if X happens.” Then feeling what is happening in my body, particularly in my belly and chest, noticing how this experience shifts. Five minutes later, my physical experience might be quite different, perhaps no longer unpleasant at all. And quite often it spontaneously occurs to me that if X does happen, it will be perfectly fine. It is not something I need to fear, after all. It can't fundamentally hurt me. I often underscore this by affirming, “Yes to \_\_\_\_.” (My mother has said, “The sooner you accept the unacceptable, the happier you'll be.”) It is quite a wonderful thing to go so quickly from “I'll die if such-and-such happens” to “It's fine if that happens” to “Yes to that happening,” simply by directing attention toward the manifestations of distress.

Understanding how suffering is created in my life helps me understand how suffering arises in the lives of others, and being able to turn toward my own distress, after having practiced this many, many times, on retreat and not, makes me less afraid of and willing to be with the distress of others. This fearlessness is one of the most important things I can offer as a chaplain.

### **Addendum**

5/30/16

When I wrote this paper, I believed the Four Noble Truths were entirely accurate but never consciously used them as a model for considering my experience. However, I now see how pertinent and helpful they are both to understanding the moment to moment unfolding of my

own life and to considering the situations of others, including in the context of providing care. Pondering how suffering is being created for myself or someone else in this very moment proves once again the wisdom of what the Buddha discovered and shows us what actions we might take to ease suffering.