

Bearing Witness to Suffering

(Based on a talk given by angel Kyodo Williams, July 6, 2010, Center for Transformative Change | New Dharma Community, Berkeley, CA)

Good Evening. How's everyone doing? Sore from sitting meditation? You've got a little ways to go and as the week wears on, it will wear on you.

Often we associate pain, physical pain, mental pain, emotional pain as being bad. One of the great gifts of a meditation retreat is that it gives you the opportunity to experience pain and transmute it into clarity, to transmute it into Awakening. The best thing about that is that it's up to you; it's a choice. You can take all of that pain and further your suffering--the external pain that is beginning to wear on you--and you can start to really shovel more onto the suffering pile. You can think about how terrible it is that you have that pain. Or you can say to yourself, "Why does there have to be quite this much sitting?" "Maybe this isn't really very sustainable," or "Gee, I'm not as flexible as I thought I was. Maybe I should do more yoga." You can just keep adding to the suffering. And that could be interesting. Or you can choose to use the external set of circumstances to shift your internal reality and environment. The physical pain in particular is very external. It's very coarse, and it's hard to deny that it's actually happening. Those nerve endings can be pretty loud when they want to be. They present themselves, "I'm here!" These are nerves, and they're being frayed. As a result they get swollen, inflamed, hot, and that's followed by varying bouts of numbness.

Your entire knee comes and goes, kind of like thoughts. Have a knee; don't have a knee. Have a lower leg; don't have a lower leg. Have a foot; don't have a foot. That's like your thoughts coming and going until you can have a conversation with yourself about how it shouldn't be this way. That somehow, in some way, you should be able to improve this condition. You should sit more often, more regularly. You should do more yoga. You should do more yoga more seriously. You should get up early. You should go to bed earlier. You should not eat this, not eat that. Or, even better, you can just fight with yourself. Right? You can just curse about how miserable and wretched you are and incapable you are. And, as I always say, about how "f*cked up and stupid" you are. That you are somehow, not right enough. You're lacking something, and your miserable body is an expression of that lack.

You can do a lot with it. You can also curse me out, but that would probably do the least good of any of those things I've said thus far. You'd get more mileage out of cursing Muki [the practice leader] out. Or you can use the outside, the conditions on the outside, to transmute what's happening on the inside. You can listen more deeply to the pain in that knee. You can evoke curiosity. You can evoke such a deep curiosity that the pain doesn't go away, but you because of the curiosity you become so intimate with it, so connected, so in relationship to the pain--rather than trying to push it away--that pain's not really happening anymore. You can ignore it, fight with it, cajole it, curse it, but still you can become intimate with it. Before you even ask what it means, you can just be present with it.

You thought I was going to say, "Ask what it means, right?" Something like that. Figure out what it means; really pay attention to it and figure out what it's calling for. But I'm talking about just being with it, as it is. That is the singular starting point to any relationship of any meaning whatsoever, to just be with it as it is. To bear witness, not only to the suffering that you see there, but also to your own reflective suffering. So there's the pain and the suffering that seems to be out there, and there's the pain that we experience as sensitive beings, right? Sensitive, feeling beings that experience pain when we witness pain, even our own pain.

When you can choose to be with that and not do anything at all to try and change it, that would be the **most radical**--in the true sense of the word--act for our social movements. To actually bear witness to the truth of the things as they are before springing out of an aggression to try to change them, alter them, manipulate them, dismantle them, undo them, reallocate them, redistribute them. But instead to bear witness to them. *Not* in opposition to them, not to peer at all of the evil that's coming from those conditions, but to actually soften into an intimate witnessing of them, as they are. We can allow ourselves to see the intense suffering that is the convergence of millennia of individual suffering coming together so that human beings can inflict and maintain pain and oppression over other human beings. Not a single bone in my body is willing to believe that that happens without the oppressor suffering, that that happens without it being the result of suffering.

Maybe just for a moment that can breathe some **life** into our relationship with suffering by bearing witness to it, by bearing witness to the supposed oppressor, by being witness to the victim, by bearing witness to the "us" that is suffering, by bearing witness to the many people that are held down, that have in their spirits been suppressed and repressed. If we can just bear witness to it, to our fear of a guy who got a job which included a gun and taser. And we can bear witness to the fear of being locked up for maybe three years, maybe forty. Or maybe bear witness to living in perpetual fear, because we didn't get locked up at all.

Maybe we can bear witness to the truth of that. Not as a way to discard the other truths, but to let it all in.

So we bear witness to the pain in our knee and our ankle and our back and our shoulder and our neck. Not to say there isn't a pain in our belly and our chest and in our elbow, in the back of our head, that those pains don't exist and that they don't matter, because we bear witness to the **whole** thing. That we step into relationship, that we become intimate with all of the truth that we can bear, with all of the truth that we can bear by taking it all in and discarding the fear that if we somehow see the "the other side," it will weaken us. It may soften us, but it won't weaken us. It may soften our hearts as it strengthens our resolve. In the same way that when you are intimate with the pain in your knee and you choose to transmute that into liberation, rather than compounding your own suffering it strengthens your resolve to sit and to sit strong and to sit with awareness. Because nothing brings attention as much as pain does. Nothing gathers our attention the way that pain does. So if we really want to be most effective, our most responsive, not reactive, our most responsive, we're required to take in all of the pain. We're required to take it all in and allow it to broaden our capacity, not for pain. We're broadening the container that takes in the material that can be transmuted into liberation.

We're making a container that can receive.

What do you think liberation comes from? Liberation from what? From pain and suffering. Want to get liberated quick? Get lots of it. Really. Go more quickly, more deeply. You can allow yourself to actually come face-to-face with your pain and your suffering. That is the straight shot to your Awakening. Right there. Isn't that great?

We have a "fast pass." You have a "fast pass" to liberation, and it's every moment that you experience suffering. It's a little window, right there. And you can take the window and you can find a little hole and kind of peek through and recoil at the light that you see. You can break the f*cking window and jump through. Know what I'm saying? You can break the window and you can jump through.