Passing It On
Lay Practitioners Share Dharma Wisdom

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The Insight Meditation Center

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Passing It On: **Background**

The growth of Western Buddhist practice has come largely through the initiative of teachers who often carry credentials based on having been a monastic and received "dharma transmission" from venerable sages. In recent years, many sanghas have developed an additional leadership resource based on long-term experienced lay practitioners whose practices have matured and strengthened through everyday kinds of experiences, for example; having families, making a living, managing organizations, pursuing professional careers, in a variety of ways developing their gifts and talents and sharing them with their communities. These practitioners may be invited to take the dharma seat from time to time, not because of their credentials, but because of the wisdom they have to pass on.

The Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City, Ca, has many such mature Lay Practitioners. Some participate and volunteer regularly at the center while others, though attending irregularly, are closely connected to our practice. Some of the lay practitioners have started small sitting groups of their own. Others have actively provided services to the IMC community, including; talks, classes, chaplaincy services, conducting weddings, memorials, serving on the board, attend interfaith meetings, offering mindfulness teachings for local businesses, school, and jails, etc.

To bring together the practice insights and dharma teachings of seasoned lay practitioners, we are launching this project in 2009 to publish art and writings about the many facets of Dharma practice in the many dimensions of lay life.

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"As he was sitting there, Ven. Ananda said to the Blessed One, 'This is half of the holy life, lord: admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie.'

'Don't say that, Ananda. Don't say that. Admirable friendship, admirable companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life.' "

- Samyutta Nikaya 45.2

In Gratitude

to Gil Fronsdal for his steady and inspiring leadership

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to the Board of Insight Meditation Center for their support

to lay practitioners everywhere applying the teachings of 2500 years in their lives

and to all of our contributors who communicate artfully about their practice.

Our Publication

Passing It On is an independent, ad-free collection of writing and art by lay practitioners connected with the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City, California. The collection celebrates the every-day lives of dharma practitioners, but not in a way that ignores its complexity. The personal essays, short stories, poetry, and art explore the challenges we face and the moments when we rise to meet those challenges.

Passing It On publishes the work of emerging and established artists who are striving to be thoughtful and awake. The collection invites readers to consider an array of ideas and then to join the conversation by submitting work for future editions. The collection is offered freely in the 2500 year-old tradition of *dana*, "generosity", and intends to show that helpful teaching can be found in the ordinary lives of lay practitioners.

Passing It On is a publication of the Insight Meditation Center which is a tax-exempt, 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Publication of *Passing It On* is supported primarily by contributor and reader donations through the Insight Meditation Center. Cash donations to IMC are tax-deductible.

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I. INVESTIGATION

After _____ by Mary Mulvihill

There is no hope -
only intent,
deep in the soul, below
the reeling shock.
Broken,
the heart still beats
in the body, in the
world as we know it, barely
scratching the surface, so much
mystery – unreasonable
pain, risk, feeling
for the light, questioning
which action
embodies integrity,
will be healing, truly
wise; human
limits of a being, full
of confusion, who needs,
loves, dreams, rises,
falls, grieves,
spins into
darkness – a crevasse
between soul & spirit, shattered
in places, completely
humbled. On my knees.
I review everything: signs
symptoms, tiny shifts
of inflection, find no
answer. Bereft, I
can only witness, listen,
ask the questions - .
unexpectedly seared
by the smallest thing. Hard
even to read. The wound,
the deep capacity needed
to go on
is reached only
beyond language by
poets who can still imagine
God, the universe
unripped by its seams.

Horned Grebe at Mansion Hill Pond by Robert Bohanan

Today at 8:47am

Golden tufts
Masks red eyes glimpsed before you dove.
Only ripples on the surface of the pond betray your presence.

We see you only for a moment - yet a moment that lingered
Long enough for my feet to catch up with my mind.

An In-Body Experience by Kim Allen

I had the fortunate opportunity recently to participate in a six-day hands-on human dissection workshop. In my Buddhist practice, I have always been drawn to investigating both the body and death, and was amazed to find a chance to do so within our Western culture, which usually avoids and denies death. The workshop was mainly intended for bodyworkers – massage therapists, chiropractors, structural integrationists, etc. – as a means of deepening the understanding of their chosen medium. When I called the instructor to explain my interest in participating as a spiritual practice, he said cheerily, “Oh, I get at least one Buddhist every time!”

The course description stated that “By unwrapping the layers of the donor’s gift, participants uncover hidden layers of themselves.” I decided to treat the course as a retreat. I told colleagues and friends that I wouldn’t be on email, arranged to stay at a quiet house, and packed my cushion along with my lab coat and nitrile gloves. The retreat analogy proved to be apt for the way the course unfolded.

Day 1: Arriving

Thirty people came together to share a task quite different from daily life. We began by standing in a circle and appreciating the gifts of the donors, silently beholding the four forms that would teach us that week. We set up an “offering table,” on which we could place objects of inspiration throughout the course. Our guide seeded it with a seashell. Rather than opening to the enormity of the whole undertaking, I focused my effort simply on being there, fully

arriving. I attended carefully to the initial instructions on how to use a scalpel. Addressing the skin layer first, we removed the mask shown to the outer world.

Day 2: The Slog

Here we encountered the oft-avoided adipose (fat) layer – and we had no choice but to go through it. Our experienced guide helped us understand that due to superficial societal mores, the adipose is misperceived; it is a whole organ unto itself, rarely appreciated or fully opened to. The emotional current in the room ran high, bringing feelings of repulsion, over-stimulation, pain, compassion, and the associated story-making. I found myself wondering if I could I really undertake the tasks of the whole week. Later, at home, I took a long, hot shower and had an unsettled sitting. The next day, one woman reported crying in her hotel room for no discernable reason, while another spoke hotly of her complaints about the workshop. Many flowers appeared on the offering table.

Day 3: Energy

The deep fascia and muscle layers brought surprising buoyancy. Spontaneous peals of laughter erupted across the room at one point, and our forms took on a sporty, well-toned look. At last there was a feeling of "settling in" to our unusual activity. On a lark, I picked up a partially opened pine cone for the offering table, and saw that others had added candles and feathers. And yet, I had an intuitive sense that this happy reprieve was temporary, serving mostly to gird us for the deeper work to come. We received instruction on using hemostats and tweezers to probe the tissues more delicately. It was becoming clear that the "layers" of the body, while clearly distinct, were nonetheless *created* by the tools. Nothing in the body is truly separate; the tissues literally interpenetrate, and are everywhere infused with nerves and vessels.

In sitting that evening, my mind was a little too quiet, as if concealing part of itself.

Day 4-5: Deep Spelunking

Here we penetrated to the heart of the body, revealing the organs that sustain life and cause death. Each form had its own oddities, of which the person was likely unaware – for example, a large intestine barely wider than the small intestine, and an extra muscle unaccounted for in medical texts. We also witnessed the features accumulated through life experience: Artificial heart valves, a stent in the abdominal aorta, and a Pillcam that had not completed its tortuous trek through the gut. Although the excitement of discovery evoked fountains of energy in me, I also connected with a stillness deep in my being, punctuated by awe. I was unprepared for the emotional impact of holding a human heart, which in turn holds the Universe. For the offering

table, I drew a mandala using colored pencils, my intention at each moment simply to pick up the next color that felt right and draw the next shape that occurred. It came out swirly and interconnected, pink, coral, ochre, and fuchsia, with a streak of leaf green. These are the colors of the body; the warm tones persist even in the chill of death.

In my sitting that evening, I sat like the ocean, immovable and ever-flowing.

Day 6: Emptiness and Letting Go

On the last day, we sought the innermost spaces, penetrating the brain, spinal cord, and bone marrow. My own nerves tingled eerily as I slipped the cord out of the fortress of the spinal column so that it dangled freely from the primitive hindbrain like a ponytail. We were at the core, but it was impossible to ignore the fact that we did not find the person, and no part was more important than another. There is nothing in the body but relationships; untangle these, and the form is empty. Finally, with simple and profound gratitude, we let the forms go. After holding hands in a hushed circle, we packed them in plain brown boxes to ship to the crematory and back to their families. Upon hearing that we were allowed to add objects from the offering table, I gently placed the mandala over the tender heart that had inspired it. Warm seawater spilled from my eyes.

Our group's thirty lives went on, but surely each had a shift in its course. The outside looks different after seeing the inside – although the resemblance between the two also increases.

Re-Integration

A powerful experience like this offers many lessons and opportunities for insight. For me, the strongest impression was *anatta*, not-self. The tissues of this body grew by some deeply organized process, coalescing out of their surroundings like a shell from the seawater, mysterious and unfathomable. There came a clear sense of disidentification, a knowing that the process is impersonal and devoid of a creator. This form is a manifestation of... what? Of *birth* – and its consequences.

Exploring the body is simultaneously an act of creation and destruction. The parts of the body have no unique existence, but rather are defined by the cutting tools and the idea and intention of the person dissecting. Each layer is created as it is explored. However, in order to perceive the body in one way, other ways must be abandoned: To see the heart *in situ*, the bone structure must be grossly altered by clipping the ribs. To bring forth the nerves of the leg, the vessels and muscles must be partially sacrificed. No view is complete, though each is instructive. I noticed how often my mind balked at destroying a part in order to learn about another part; I wanted to retain it all.

In the end, despite encountering the profound alienness of this form, the most ordinary, everyday result of the workshop is a stronger connection to my body. At one level, simply having seen how the muscles are rigged to the skeleton, where the organs sit, and the way the whole body is wrapped cozily in fascia, I have a better intuition in making movements. And at a different level, there is simply greater ease of being. My tai chi has improved. My breathing is a little freer.

With gratitude, I bow to the body – this one that serves as my own vehicle, and all the others that sit, stand, walk, and lie down during their days of animation. I bow to the body as a vehicle of skillful action, and as a vehicle of insight. Soon enough, the one we see in the mirror will be cast off like a shell by a being who has always floated in the ocean. Until then, may we walk with grace.

So Much Light by Carolyn Dille

There is so much light
today

in every spider's strand

too many to count

in gnats' wings against the sun

in each cell of each
leaf of bay and oak.

So much light

I haven't seen my self.

Surprised by Marianna Tubman

At the end of a recent Dharma talk, Gil Fronsdal invited attendees to answer various questions about their practice including “what has surprised you?” I realized that one of my surprises was a breakthrough insight I had during a walking meditation. Another happened while listening to a song.

I have been reading Darlene Cohen's book *The One Who Is Not Busy - Connecting With Work in a Deeply Satisfying Way*" for the IMC Dharma Book Discussion Group, and doing what I can of the recommended practices. My busyness tends to be at home, and I don’t have much time to do exercises or meditation when I’m there. I commute to San Francisco via public transit and walk from the train station or bus stop to my workplace. This is a time when my mind often gets caught up in ruminations and worrying about the state budget crisis, homeless people, or trash running into the ocean and killing sea-life. It can be hard for me to shake these thoughts. So, I tried Cohen’s walking meditations during my morning walk from the train to work.

Practice # 3 in the book is a walking meditation in which one practices alternating focus between different objects of awareness. One morning I tried noticing what I liked to look at for a few minutes, then noticing what I didn’t like to look at.

In the somewhat rundown South of Market neighborhood, it was hard to find things I liked to look at, but I found a few things - neat brick walls, blue sky, flat sidewalks, a few nicely dressed people. (I ignored the dirty homeless person since I was focusing on the positive). The real surprise was when I tried focusing on what I didn’t like. I realized that there isn't really much I don't like! Nothing evoked strong feelings of dislike. For those that did stir up dislike, when I didn't start analyzing it, or making judgments, the feeling did not last long at all. I didn't

have to return to thoughts of gratitude or notice the blue sky to let go of negative thoughts; the thoughts just left as I moved on and asked myself "now what don't I like?" It was one of my most pleasant walks to work.

The second surprise was listening to a favorite song, "If a Tree Falls" by Bruce Cockburn, which is about the destruction of rainforests and the consequent loss of species. The song has very powerful lyrics, and I find the rhythm and guitar playing is mesmerizing. I have listened to it many times.

"If a tree falls in the forest... does anybody hear" is the main refrain. As I listen to it, I sometimes think of trees and whether anyone notices an individual tree dying. Sometimes I think of people and wonder who really notices an individual human death, or when an individual falls on hard times (sickness, homelessness, unemployment). For what seemed like the first time one morning, I tuned into the wording of the full refrain: "If a tree falls in the forest ... does anybody hear... the FOREST fall?" It is not just about noticing the fate of the individual tree. It is about being aware of the bigger change that is going on, such as the loss of the forest ecology, which is at first only visible or audible through smaller events.

Since I have the thinking habit of generalizing from individual to greater pattern – one of the challenges of my walk to work - it's odd that I haven't noticed this in the refrain of the song. This is probably because I am conditioned to expect the sentence to be completed "does anybody hear it (the TREE) fall?"

It seems to me there are many things in life which are like this, where we are aware of things being done to or by individuals but don't see the greater picture, or, we have something repeated to us over and over but miss the precise message. Sometimes the message doesn't get through until one is in the right state of mind or has listened many times. That's one reason I like to listen to talks on Audio Dharma and re-listen to those that especially resonate with me.

Buddhists often focus on compassion for the suffering of the individual, and emphasize our common humanity - that the kind of suffering they experience is the same as ours - but usually don't see so clearly the way that suffering can be part of a larger pattern. For example, to me a homeless man is not just the result of individual behavior or misfortune. He is the most visible sign of much larger societal problems. Thousands of people on low-lying islands are being made homeless due to worldwide carbon emissions and other activities which accelerate global warming. Societal changes, natural disasters, and a range of individual actions cause whole villages, organizations, cultures, species, and even ecosystems to vanish. Sometimes bit by bit, sometimes all at once – but these losses are much more than the sum of the individuals lost or affected, and can have far-reaching effects around the globe.

I'm afraid we tend to overlook the way that our individual actions collectively contribute to widespread suffering and destruction. It is not enough to have good intentions in our direct interactions, due to the far-reaching nature of so many activities. We can easily see the individual ant that we step on or don't step on, or the homeless person helped by a donation to a food bank. We don't usually see the deadly effects of our carelessly discarded plastic trash washed out to sea, the greenhouse gases from the electricity used by our computers, the forests cut down for magazines and toilet paper. But these are a much bigger and more significant part of the world's reality.

The challenge for me is to be aware of the bigger picture of neglect and destruction which is indirectly visible through the individual incidents, objects and stories I come in contact with, and still be able to hold in my awareness that the world in front of me is something I don't dislike. Can I notice the dirty homeless person, feel compassion, consider the society which contributes to homelessness, and not get caught up in anger or hopelessness? Can I love and enjoy the ordinary world and its inhabitants, without turning a blind eye to the pattern of selfish behaviors and ignorant neglect that threaten the life of this planet?

Rooster in the Night by Gerry Sarnat

The shadows in earnest, candles sputter,
burn molecules might fuel extra hours not to be.

Ears ring, cheeks turn pink
imagining my love imagine me.

She sings the song of her soul these forty-nine days
I sit with the urn, cry stars into her ashen sky.

The valley of shadows disorders time
as I fumble prayer beads.

My thumbs feel a scuffle to take earthly leave,
hurtle away on cinnamon bardo wings.

Funneled through dusk's gray cocoon melee,
untethered, a radiant silk moth dawns past mourning.

II. TRANSFORMATION

Let Silence be the Art of Practice by Gerry Sarnat

Ahah! This is the seventh day of retreat in noble silence.

An early Dalai Lama favored the feeblest of horses. While neigh-sayers thought steeds could barely saunter, could never be taught to soar, not worth the ATP, the Bodhisattva of Compassion bet the opposite. After all, wouldn't the swiftest glean little from training? My hack mindfulness is quenched only at breakfast. There and there alone am I nimble, no unicorn shadow wrangling, no need to be shown the whip.

Unkarmic to make eye contact with other renunciates, I gaze at my bowl of delights, steamy millet with treasure sprinkled on top. One sun-ripened raspberry crown -- kingly generosity so others might feast. A single queenly raisin. Two stately almonds, so subtle, so smooth, as my incisors tease each into divine halves. A spoonful of granola cascades from the castle into a moat of milk. A dollop of honey sweetens my domain, a smattering of orange rind compote seeps through the whiteness to unite the realm.

Bring on more heavenly fruits! A finely honed knife cuts bits of flawless pear, ripe apple. "What flair!" I muse again on my internist's hobbyhorse -- until opposite at the table, a real blade wizard pathologist performs amputory miracles carving mango. Old enough to no longer inhabit a low maintenance body, there's added benefit to this fare: the far reaches of my network of tubes and holes will soon be prune-lubricated. My flesh machine mashes grapefruit eighths into its fuel pipe on the way to the furnace on the way to becoming me.

I do not crave as much now, am better gauging my appetite. Lesson learned by sixth breakfast: less is more. Every meal I want less, rare second helpings, hardly anything left in my dish. But the banana I've been eyeing turns out to be wooden, flavorless, desiccating. What to do? Accept the offering with open heart, untainted taste buds? Reach beyond pleasure to sustenance? Ten thousand joys and ten thousand sorrows? Take the gracious green crescent booty as is -- or judge, put it aside? Some days eaten, today not. 'What will the others think?' asks my comparing brain, 'of the rest of my poorly camouflaged waste? Can I slip it into the compost bucket on the sly?'

I am royally grateful for attendant windfalls; that green tea may ward off cardiovascular disease. Throughout this gastronomic procession, my fingertips linger on the mug's warmth,

my cheeks bathe in its fragrance -- which almost allows me to forget yesterday's guilt-ridden nightmare. A horseless knight traipses in, swinging a stinking incense-burner, it's miasma enveloping him, a plague victim punished by God at his job building character again.

Not to complain, but such overwhelming sensations given free rein -- then sneaking a pen to scrawl it all down on napkins -- get confusing. Didn't I take vows not to write this week? I am the last person in the dining hall. The dishwashers wait on my utensils to finish up, just as I will theirs during my work meditation. Something inside shouts out tomorrow's *Inquiring Mind* headline: IGNOBLE YOGI EXPOSED COMPOSING!

Imperial gong signaling next sitting, blinders on, bit back in, this bad actor (screenplay stuffed in pants) jockeys to the starting gate, hopes not to lag down the homestretch. Our thoroughbred dharma teacher quoting Rumi seems to horse-whisper directly in my ear: "Words no matter how humble seeming, are really a kind of bragging. Let silence be the art of your practice."

Anxiety Attacks and Mindfulness by Jim Bronson

I teach Intro to Meditation classes for the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City, CA. The people who show up for the intro classes usually find us through three means, which have a lot to do with their being unique personality types and often in some distress; through the web after googling something like "pain management", through the advice of a friend or colleague who cares but doesn't know what to say or do about their distress, or through the urging of a therapist.

This evening a tall dark fellow arrived late and breezed in just as I was talking about how meditation is simple to do, just hard to remember to do it. He introduced himself in a somewhat British accent as being from Singapore where he represented a high technology company. With big eyes he told about encountering anxiety attacks a year back such that he would have to cancel business trips and shutter himself into his apartment for days at a time. Through googling he had found our meditation center, not far from the world headquarters for his company, and was hoping for some relief from the anxiety attacks.

By the end of the class, after experiencing three short periods of just sitting and noticing what comes up, he seemed more relaxed and I noticed that he stayed after the class for our

center's usual evening sitting and talk. I didn't think any more about him for 7 or 8 months. Then he showed up again, this time at a Beginner's Practice Course I co-taught at the center. This time he talked in the past tense about anxiety attacks and said he still could not figure out what had helped him, but they had diminished to where he no longer had to put off business trips. He appeared periodically at our center for a while until I noticed a news article saying that his company had been bought by a larger competitor. Now, I imagine him somewhere sitting and noticing what comes up.

Someone is Dying by Kaveri Patel

That someone is me.

Not a 6 month to one year prognosis from a terminal illness, but a letting go of all I have ever known.

I used to believe that fear would save me. Worry just enough, and maybe even sprinkle just a little extra anxiety to convince myself I can control future events.

I know nothing. Except for this moment. Beginner's Mind, my mind is like an empty page. The words cannot be written, the colors cannot be painted until the moment arrives.

And when it does, I will know who to be, what to say, what to do. I am on the right path. I wish to let go of all my preconceived notions of what will happen. The only thing I wish to hold onto is trust in this practice.

Good bye old mind. I do not hate you. I do not wish for you to die sooner than you must. You brought me here. I will collect ashes from your pyre, let them scatter with the wind and float on the river.

You will join the earth, as I am born again.

In the Pines by Kari Prager

The trees are always green here.
My glance dances from branch to branch.
Sunlight's broken shards lay a mosaic
on forest floor. I came here to be alone
but I am not. The understory
rumbles with the munching of beetles,
the millipede's tiny feet prance
over pine needles slowly turning
to mulch, smelling of tomorrow.
Deeper, earthworms tunnel blindly
through the podsol, turning the
earth with earnest diligence,

This place is a comfort. I lean against
the scratchy trunk of a lodgepole pine.
The melancholy that brought me here
sloughs off, nibbled away by busy
legions of ants, trudging back with
countless morsels for their queen.
I don't fear death here. If it
came to me, strangely comforting,
no regret would outlast it. I can play
with such musings while I know
for now the pulse of blood is strong.

Perhaps will come a time when,
undiscovered, I'd be but a bag
of skin covering whitening bones
that once held me up against the pull
of the earth. I can't say why,
but it comforts me that the forest
would turn me into something
written in a language scratched by
foraging partridges under the deadfall.

Nothing can harm me once
this beautiful life joins something
common to every creature in this place.

III. COMPASSION

Caregivers and Meditation by Bruce Arnold

I was moved to write this after receiving a card from my best friend from college today. She needed a part time job and is working as a caregiver 14 hours a week as well as working for NY State. She wrote me today to tell me that she is working with a 94 year-old woman who wants to know how to meditate and she thought of me.

My friend Beth took the class with me in NY that introduced me to Buddhism and led me down the path of becoming Buddhist myself. Beth informed me that she was going back through old CDs that I had sent her as well as going on the internet to gather info to share with this older woman.

She didn't say much about the meditation itself, just what a blessing it was to have this woman she was supposed to be caregiving instead ministering to her. It pleased me that Beth was getting a taste of what my life volunteering at hospice is like; the sweetness in being transformed by those we think we're teaching.

This Morning by Kaveri Patel

This morning my body felt heavy. I could not remember my dream, but knew it must have reflected my attachment and control of my daughter's future.

She will be starting preschool soon, and I have anxiously been hoping that we find the right fit where her soul will be honored and nurtured. I know. That sounds deep for a 2 and a half year old, right? Perhaps it reflects my fears from my own childhood, of not feeling like I was understood.

As I sat down to meditate, I began to plan the meditation. I probably spent most of the 20 minutes finding "just the right thing" that would alleviate my physical discomfort. I tried all kinds of things. Feeling my body, silently telling myself nothing was wrong, that this too was part of my experience and that it was OK. After the sit, I felt myself contracting even more and reacting to my inability to soothe the discomfort.

Why do we run away from pain? There is the biological flight or flight response, but there is also an underlying belief that something is wrong. Perhaps even that something is wrong with us.

The ocean is a metaphor for our being. The waves come and go. We can run away, or let them move through us, and stay in contact with them as best as we can. It takes great faith in my practice to learn to stay, no matter what is occurring. It also takes compassion to be forgiving and gentle with myself when I am running away.

May I entrust myself to the waves.
May my heart expand beyond the sea where the sky and earth can hold everything.

May you entrust yourself to the waves.
May your heart expand beyond the sea where the sky and earth can hold everything.

Interventions by Carla Brooke

After a morning of yoga, my body is stretched to take in the ocean view. Still, I can feel my chest muscles tighten as I drive along Hwy 1 to teach Intensive Intervention, an afternoon program at an elementary school near my home in Half Moon Bay. I give myself an hour to set up for the nonstop whirlwind of students who are pulled out from their classroom for literacy help. Many are the children of migrant workers who have come to California to make a better life for their family.

While setting up the classroom I often find myself in a frantic blur - beautiful moments with a child interrupted by a wildfire of distracted behavior I need to address. I wrestle with how I can best help these at-risk children with complex emotional and academic needs.

Recess is a rowdy and sometimes frightening world out on the playground. When the students come to my classroom, D-2, I want them to see it as a safe sanctuary. They run in eagerly, “Can I go on the computers first?” I don’t answer until we sit in mindful attention for a few minutes, listening to the sound of the singing bowl. “What do you hear now?,” I ask. Feet stop knocking against chairs and the gradual silence envelops us all. It helps me as much as the children to do a mindfulness listening practice before beginning class.

One day, during a particularly stressful time in my life, I enter D-2, a shared teachers room, and see the skeleton of a shark on the table where my attendance sheet and singing bowl are

normally kept. A group of 4th graders sit in rapt attention while a man with an Australian accent talks loudly about sharks. A few of the kids recognize me and wave in my direction. The man says, “No they rarely attack people on shore. The movie ‘Jaws’ isn’t true. Are there any more questions?" Apparently, it is Ocean Week. I wait outside by the children’s education garden until the presenter is done, reminding myself of the anchor words I teach the children, “breathing in, I feel my belly rise, breathing out, gently releasing.”

As soon as I return to the classroom the school bell rings. Cesar, a nine-year old boy with a peaceful, lilting voice arrives first. Our class celebrated Cesar’s birthday last month writing appreciative adjectives to describe him. I took dictation on a poster board while each student described their classmate. “Cesar is calm, considerate, a good friend.” I framed each word inside overlapping circles and handed it to the birthday boy afterwards to take home.

Since then, Cesar has been the first to arrive. He cut his recess short today to help me set up. The metal door jam squeaks against the cement as he comes in. “Is there anything you need help with today, Mrs. Brooke?” My back is towards him, my eyes are riveted on the defiant computers that refuse to turn on no matter how may times I try. The Sesame Street look-alike software is not my friendly neighbor after all. I vent my frustration in Cesar’s composed direction. “The computers won’t start. I don’t know what I’m doing wrong.” I turn around and realize that this four foot tall boy who writes poetry about endangered seabirds has come to rescue his floundering teacher. “Maybe the computers need to relax, Mrs. Brooke.”

I look at Cesar with reverence before letting my tension turn into a ripple of laughter. He is my mindfulness teacher today, this son of a gardener who has learned about patience. Cesar, is the one who, after the singing bowl stops ringing, raises his hand politely and says, “I hear flowers growing.”

After this I decide to augment the federally funded literacy curriculum by bringing in a hyacinth bulb floating in a glass vase, guaranteed to bloom in two weeks. Keep the water clean, the directions remind me. Sometimes I forget to clean the water and one of the children reminds me. As part of our mindfulness exercise at the beginning of each class I pass around the hyacinth to each child. “What is different today? Each child makes a fanlike folding book that honors each stage of growth; the bare bulb floating in water, the first show of green, the leaves and finally a purple flower growing like a regal crown.

Feeling that I too have grown roots, I bring in a children’s story I have written. Next to the singing bowl on the formica table I lovingly place the photo of our dog, Hanai, sitting with me on the beach when she was a puppy. It was taken soon after my husband and I brought her

back from Hawaii. We had found her, a skinny black dog who had been wandering around homeless. We were in Hawaii because what I knew of my past had literally gone up in smoke nine months before - our house burned. One turn of a dryer cycle had forced us to let go of the past. We were fortunate that our house didn't burn completely, the firemen had said. If they had arrived five minutes later it would have been a different story. After the restoration, my husband John and I went to Hawaii to celebrate and we found, and rescued, Hanai. As I read the story of Hainai to the class, I realize that rescuing Haini was a life-changing event, but it is not clear exactly whose life changed the most or who rescued whom?

The 5th graders, my most challenging group of students, have been asking about my dog ever since I read that story. Later, while facing my group of 3rd graders, I added some information about the origin of Hanai's name. I put a syllable breakdown of the Hawaiian word on the board behind me. "Hanai" means adopted family. As I read to the 3rd graders I become aware that over the past six months this diverse group of children have become my Hanai.

Later that week my initial fear that first generation students won't understand my heartfelt story is transformed by a series of colorful illustrations they make at the art table. Cesar makes an expressive felt pen rendering of Hanai playing in the grass, while Osvaldo draws the stars overhead and several rainbows captioned by, "Hanai's dream of finding a home."

With just a few more weeks left to the end of school, I realize it has been a privilege to work with these children. As my heart opens wider, healing opportunities find their way in. Since that day of the shark's guest appearance, I find myself in a calmer state of self-acceptance.

Among the stuffed folders where I keep student's writing and artwork is a separate file for my attendance sheet. It took me nearly six months to say their names without a mix up. A quiet 4th grader would patiently remind me, "I'm Alberto," after mistakenly calling him Alfredo. I look at my pencil marks in the various columns on the attendance sheet. What the marks don't show are the life lessons that came to me through these children.

For example, Francisco, a referral from Child Protective Services, is one of the boys I have to send to the office frequently because of out of control behavior. A skinny boy with a perceptive, sharp wit, Francisco's comments jump out of his mouth in repetitive, sharp bursts through the flannel hood tucked over his head. Over time, his impulsive outbursts have quieted down long enough for him to draw a picture of his feelings. One day, when he stayed after class to help me clean up, I noticed him with a drawing that he hid from me. With some coaxing I got to see part of it. I most remember the urgency in the wild repeated strokes he made with a dark green marking pen, and his shyness at revealing his emotions to me.

An other student, Filiberto, asked to show me his work. He pointed to a wildly rendered warm yellow line crossing through the center of a deep red field. “This is my anger," (pointing at the red field), "and this,” he pauses, “is my happiness coming through.” I feel grace settle right here where our eyes meet. In the silence that follows, Filiberto continues to draw, adding starry yellow dots in the few empty spaces that remain.

On the last Friday in May we talked and drew about bullying. Eric had been acting somber and uncommunicative lately. I asked Eric to read out loud from a book that tells a story about bullying at school, *No One Knew What To Do.* As Eric read he seemed to be getting the message. A happy ending results when the story’s main character summons enough courage to reach out for help from his teachers. The teachers provide a supportive intervention that helps transform the cycle of violence at his school.

After reading the story, Eric lights up with passionate resolve and tells me how much bullying he has witnessed at our school and at his home. Eric then makes a poster on the biggest paper we can find. He puts in bold lettering what he just read. "The first step: to ask for help from an adult; not being afraid to speak out, and fearlessly banding together with others who witness bullying and want to help." Eric adds his own commentary and illustrations to his poster. “This planet is in trouble because people are mad at one another. People fight and they don’t want to tell somebody big.” He signs his full name at the end of his statement. Now Eric helps ring the singing bowl at the beginning of our class and continues to write about nonviolence during our final weeks together.

The hyacinth flower bloomed at last. Instead of the two weeks promised, it took 3 months. During that period of attentive care the bulb became our class mascot. When I brought it home to freshen the cloudy water, the children always noticed it was gone and asked where it was. We were so pleased when it bloomed we had a birthday party for it. I laid the vase carefully on a violet colored tablecloth. In the picture I took, Eric, Jennifer and Flavio are smiling like proud parents beside the flower that seems larger than life. Near the vase is a handmade card from a student that says, “You rock, Mrs. Brooke." Beside that is a zen-like poem written by an eight year old girl, Viri. She wrote it one afternoon while playing with a language game. The pieces she puzzled together speak of the hyacinth and of our year of interventions together, “Flowers will grow silently.”

IV. INSIGHT

As We are with Animals (the journey to who we really are) by Rob Rossell

What can encounters with animals teach us about what is possible in our relationships with others within our own species? I remember years ago standing on my back deck holding out a hand-full of sunflower seeds to our resident Chickadees to see if one would flutter down and eat the seeds out of my hand.

We had many Chickadees, attracted to bird feeders hanging from a rope on a pulley stretching from our house to a large pine tree in our back yard. I absolutely loved those birds. They were very persistent and verbal in reminding me to fill the cylindrical bird feeders when they got low on seeds. I loved their playfulness and good humor. At times they would be willing to eat sunflower seeds out of my hand. I noticed that it would only happen if I was willing to wait and was exceedingly calm and centered. They became my teachers in mindfulness and presence and were unerring and reliable in giving me good feedback.

I am Buddhist and a therapist and my wife is Jewish. She recently told me a joke she heard from the Rabbi at services Friday night, "What do you get when you cross a Buddhist and a Jew? The answer: A person who sits up all night worrying about nothing."

To me this poses the question, what does it mean to have a self and love the self? It is a question at the heart of my spiritual journey and how I approach offering psychotherapy. When people come to see me as a psychotherapist, they are, in a sense, sitting up at night worrying about nothing. They may not have the language or be settled enough to articulate their suffering in meaningful questions. In a sense I am asking over and over again, "What is your question?"

As I see it, the whole point is practice...practice... practice. Teach myself and my clients to love unconditionally, especially the self. Gently (and sometimes fiercely) move myself and clients away from self-harm and self-invalidation so they we begin to explore all the qualities and possibilities of self that are available. The main thrust is cultivating a way of not being trapped by our own minds as we move through the world. More and more, it seems to me, the core practice is developing a willingness to do nothing, and not run away from what is happening. Approach life freshly with intention every moment, just like the chickadee that came to my hand.

Practice by Carolyn Dille

slow
stop
sit
still
see

Lessons from the Kodhana Sutta by Dave Barnett

I grew up thinking that everyone should play by the rules: *give credit where credit is due; take responsibility for your mistakes; don't cut in line; don't cheat; don't brag; don't take what's not yours.* They weren't written down anywhere, but they didn't have to be. Everyone knows what the rules are. Life is fair, and if you play by the rules, everything comes out the way it's supposed to.

As I grew older and experienced more of the corporate world, I noticed that people didn't always play by the rules. There are people who take credit for things they didn't do, and blame others for their own mistakes. They aggressively pursue self-promotion and aggrandizement, while tarnishing the reputations of rivals. Some of them bully and intimidate those below them, while flattering those above. They undercut others in order to make themselves look better. I don't like these people.

I believed that if I continued to play by the rules, I would get rewarded, and the cheaters would get caught. What they were doing was so obvious, it was just a matter of time before someone would see through the phoniness and lies, and they would get what they deserved. Instead, they got promoted, and the unfairness of it all kept me up at night. Stubbornly, I stuck with the rules. I worked to be a better person – meditation, self-improvement seminars, retreats, and following the rules.

One day, I met and became involved with a woman who was the one for me. A saint, always thinking of others, giving of herself generously, she brought out the best in me. The world was a better place because she was in it. Smart, funny, confident, fearless, and adventurous…she was *right* for me. Finding her was my reward for being a good person and always playing by the rules. We moved in together, we were happy, and I was at peace. This was how my life was meant to be.

I bought a diamond ring, and asked her to marry me. She put the ring on, looked at it sadly, and said she couldn't get married-- there wasn't time. She believed she would die by the time she was 30, and there were still things to do in the two years she had left. I thought this was crazy -- she was in perfect health, and full of life. I was really disappointed, and maybe a little resentful, but I figured we all have our quirks. It's part of being human.

Things started to fall apart with the relationship after that, and she moved out. I tried to convince her that we could work things out, but she was too busy. I was patient. I believed she was the one for me, and sooner or later she'd come around.

About a year later, she called to tell me they found a lump in her breast, and she was waiting for the biopsy results. "Don't tell anyone. You're the only one who knows." Two days later, we found out. "It's malignant... Could you come over?"

In the end, the mastectomies and chemo didn't work, and I knew that there was no God and the rules were a cruel joke.

"Anger fathers misery" and I pushed both down deep for years. I got on with life, worked hard, got married, kept busy. But I had lost my optimism and trust in the future, and things were not the same. There were no rules anymore, and nothing I did would ever really matter. Eventually, I had to make a decision to give up, or find a way out. Earlier experiences with Buddhism called to me, and I took up the practices again.

Bit by bit, I let go of the sadness, and learned to step away from it. Being angry at things that had already happened didn't make them not happen; I couldn't change the past, I could only accept it. Hoping that meditation would release me from the sense of entitlement to fairness, I started attending Vipassana sessions at the lighthouse a few miles up the coast. Once a week, we would sit for about 30 minutes, and then have a dharma talk by a local teacher. I didn't pay too much attention to the talks. I just sat through them to be polite.
One evening, the meditation and talk were led by Buddhist nuns visiting the area. They were nothing like the stern, serious, whack-you-with-a-ruler-if-you-misbehaved Catholic nuns I had grown up around. These nuns were *happy*. They laughed, made jokes about themselves, and

didn't miss a thing. This wasn't what I was expecting from bald headed renunciates. They…*sparkled*.

One of them led an animated and entertaining discussion of women in Buddhism and what it was like to be a nun. I was thoroughly enjoying this when the nun seated at the far right caught my attention-- because of what she *wasn't* doing. She didn't move around, shift her position, or clear her throat. She was completely still, like a pond in the forest when no breeze was blowing, no ripples or disturbance marring the perfect reflection of the surface. I watched closely. She was fully present and engaged, but at the same time, serene and totally at peace. I wondered if I could ever do that.

I started paying more attention to the talks, and tried to understand what they meant. When I first heard about taking refuge in the Buddha, I thought this meant praying to the Buddha to destroy evil. Then I discovered that taking refuge was more like getting under shelter during the monsoon season. It was still wet and miserable outside, but the shelter protected us from the rain. I discovered that taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha was not a ritual, but a strategy.

I continued to attend the Wednesday night talks. I discovered the Dharma Seed and Audio Dharma websites, loaded up my iPod with talks, and listened to them whenever I could. I discovered the Pali Canon, and things started to connect and make sense. The Dharma talks are not metaphysical musings, they are tools. The Eight Fold Noble Path is not a catechism, it's a roadmap. The Five Precepts are not commandments, they are guides to liberation. I'm a practical person. If it works, I use it. I discovered that dwelling in destructive emotions damages me, and leads to bad outcomes. The more I practiced *metta*, *karuna*, and *mudita*, the easier it became to accept what was given. Even extending a little compassion towards those I disliked changed my outlook. My anger, resentment and contempt dissipated, and injustices no longer mattered very much. Things are the way they are, so don't waste time and energy trying to change things that don't change.

Hindrances arise. I feel anger, restlessness, and doubt come up. So, I do as they tell us for mediation – I note it. I feel anger coming on, and I say "oh I'm getting angry" – and that usually stops the anger in its tracks, or least slows it down. I practice the antidotes. This really works.

> *There was once a Samurai, named Nobuchika, who approached the Zen master Hakuin, and asked whether there were really Hell and Heaven. The Zen master asked him, "Who are you?" The Samurai answered, "I am a Samurai, sir". "Uh! Are you?" the*

master exclaimed, and said, "You don't look like a Samurai; you look like a beggar". The Samurai got angry and grabbed his sword. When Master Hakuin saw that, he said, "Ha! You have a sword. It looks very dull and useless. What can you do with that dull sword?" Nobuchika drew his sword out of the sheath. Then Master Hakuin said, softly, "See! The gate of Hell opens now". When Nobuchika heard that, he stopped, and put his sword back in its sheath. Master Hakuin said, kindly, "The gate of Heaven opens now".

I used to get stressed out over things that might or might not happen. When something unfair happened, I would replay it in my head for days, building up the resentment. I was angry when life wasn't fair and when cheaters won.

Now, I just let these things go. When a series of unfortunate events occurs, I look at it like a situation comedy and laugh. Life has become much easier now that I realize it is as it is. This year, the company I worked for was acquired, and I was laid off. In 1688, Masahide's house and business burned, and he wrote:

Barn's burnt down
Now
I can see the moon.

Got it.

Never So Moved By a Prune by Bruce Freedman

It was five hours before noon.
Sitting on retreat, about to eat
The usual oatmeal and stewed fruit treat.

Beholding a prune in my spoon,
I realized the prune would soon be me.
Insight of oneness, I could see.
Enlightened for a moment.

One with the pruniverse!

What a boon that prune in my spoon.
For now I was in tune, smiling like a goon,
Never so moved by a prune.

A Lucid Dream by Jin Liang

I was in a gathering accompanied by my husband and some friends. The room was bright and well decorated, plenty of food and drinks lying around. Sunlight streamed through lacy curtains, bringing in views of hills, trees and clouds. People around were mostly strangers to me. A woman with gray hair was dancing with a young man in silence. They did not look at each other, nor touch each other. There was a sense of isolation. The air breathed lightness. People moved about freely without any obligation to nod or smile. It was quiet, as if the volume of sound in the world had been turned off, leaving us performing in mime. Each of us seemed to carry a buffer space around us. Events took shapes and evolved through each private space. The spaces often collided with each other, sometime distorted a little, but never quite intermingled. A young woman carried a food tray, a man reached over with his hand to pick up a slice of chocolate. A child ran over from the sofa to the middle of the room where his mom was standing, and pulled her skirt for attention. A passerby bent down with a cookie to look at him, and made a funny face to the little boy. An old man dropped his napkin on the far side close to the window, and the blonde lady with long hair next to him picked it up for him. A nod and a smile were exchanged. In each of these encounters, their bodies moved towards each other, squeezing out the space between them, then, the interaction took place accompanied by hand or body gestures. Some of the interactions were brief, some lasted longer. In the end, their bodies curved backwards, prepared for exit.

Watching the events unfolding in silence, I felt suspended, and unable to play my parts. I turned and looked into the illusive eyes of my husband, wondering what his next move would be. “This is not real. You are in a dream,” an inner voice came to me. I looked around me. Everything was surprisingly vivid. It was impossible to make it vague or disappear. “I need to make myself wake up to prove that I had been in a dream,” I thought to myself. Yet, I was immobilized. Everything around me seemed to exert certain grips on me, forced me to stay. As I dwelled deeper into the thought of leaving, my sense of confinement and urgency increased. I had to find a way to break away from it. I had to wake up.

Not having any better means, I sought after my will. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and began visualizing myself leaving the room I was in. Slowly, the furniture in the

room began to distort, human figures began to warp with exaggerated expressions of pain and stun. The room was tilting towards one side, objects tumbling on the verge of sliding off the horizon. I did not expect that in order for me to leave the scene, I had to destroy it and everything in it. And I was still in it. When the space continued to be strained to its limit, a splitting headache spread across my head. I bit my lips, closed tightly my eyes, thinking that I was about to collapse or go insane. I simply couldn't hold this any longer. Suddenly, I lost my strength, and vanished.

I did not remember what happened after that. What happened to that dream space? Had I gotten out? Or, had I gone back to it? Obviously, I fell asleep. When I finally woke up in the morning, my awake space began to bear some semblance to the dream space I was in.

V. EQUANIMITY

First Lilies of the Spring by Jeanne van Gemert

Before the early March snowfall, Spring in my neighborhood was in fast forward mode. Daffodils were galloping, fragrant flowering apricot blossoms (prunus mume) had come and gone, cherry blossoms had faded and the daphne were just coming into their glory. The perfect and predictably ordered spring sequence was unfolding. As in the structure of a familiar symphony, you know that the violins will set the melody echoed first by the oboes, etc.

I often feel a structure unfolding as I sit to meditate. There is no other time quite like the beginning when I slide more deeply into myself. I begin to move into well-practiced territory where the doors, in sequence, start to soften and open.

On Friday in the woods by the creek I saw the first trout lilies begin their exquisite yellow blooms. Trout lilies have broad leaves like speckled green tongues that suddenly throw out winter's brown floor - and I lost my balance. In a split second I was searching for tree buds, imagining the first tiny origami-shaped unfurling leaves. I imagined the pale green new leaves flooding the trees and I realized I'd been washed downstream. I was very far away from the present moment. So I stopped. Breathed. Breathed in the dark brown tree limbs just as they were. Stood in the cold quiet of the winter woods just as it was. I did slyly smile at the trout lilies but kept my feet firmly on the cold winter ground and carefully appreciated things just as they are.

Dharma and End-of-Life Caregiving by Dr. John Ruark

About twenty five hundred years ago, a spoiled young aristocrat named Siddhartha Gautama had a series of encounters with illness, infirmity, and death that shook his complacent world view to its core. This personal cataclysm eventually caused him at age 29 to abandon his comfortable life, including his wife and young son, in order to search for better answers than his current thinking could provide to the problem of human suffering.

Those of us who have been called to care for people dealing with serious illness, death, and bereavement are daily confronted with the very same awesome and painful realities about the human condition that sent young Siddhartha into his spiritual crisis. Since most of us probably lack the time and inclination to wander northern India for six years in search of answers, I am going to try to distil my best understanding of how the Buddha's insights can be brought to bear on the problems of suffering that end-of-life caregivers encounter every day. The ideas and practices I present are the ones that have proven the most useful to me in confronting my own version of the challenges I have encountered in thirty years of work with the dying and grieving.

First, before I can be an effective caregiver for others, I have to understand MY suffering. An example of my suffering is when I am driving in my car, I have a sense for how fast I need to be going and how much space I prefer between my car and the others sharing the road. All too often, someone encroaches on that, say, by cutting me off or tailgating me or having the nerve to be blocking my way by preferring to go more slowly. The unpleasant feeling I have can range from irritation to rage depending on how egregious the violation of my sense of entitlement, my desire to have things the way I think they should be. I find driving to be my most reliable daily laboratory for trying to practice mindfulness, though I am embarrassed to report how often I lapse into reactivity, sometimes just in my thoughts, sometimes in my actions. (I am reminded of a bumper sticker that said, HORN BROKEN, WATCH FOR FINGER…)

Now, of course, I have other kinds of attachments that also bring joy as well as suffering -- attachments to the people I love. Here is an interesting dynamic tension: on the one hand, I can at least theoretically avoid suffering by avoiding attachments. However, if I somehow manage to do that life looks pretty bleak. So, inevitably, if I love I also sign on for suffering,

and to fail to love is to avoid the essence of what life has to offer. As Oliver Hardy often said to Stan Laurel, “Isn’t this a fine mess we’ve gotten ourselves into!”

But wait, it gets worse! The current unfortunate (perhaps) truth about our brains is that the part that makes us human is literally designed to form attachments. What was our Intelligent Designer thinking? If you look at the size of the forebrain in mammals, you will see that it increases in direct proportion to the complexity of the problem each species faces in finding prey and avoiding predators, or in other words, predicting the future. And the kinds of attachments that cause suffering are exactly that: predictions of the future. So no matter how hard we work at not forming attachments, we are pretty much hosed, since the instant we let down our guard, our brain is going to start doing what it was created to do.

The neurobiology of this process is dictated by a principle called Hebb’s Axiom, which stated over half a century ago: “Neurons that fire together wire together.” This simple concept has powerful consequences, since the more often we repeat a pattern of thought or action, the more hard-wired it becomes. Fortunately, the reverse is true as well: if we stop repeating a pattern it decays, and can be replaced by newer, more adaptive patterns if we diligently practice the new way of thinking and acting. For example, when I was addicted to tennis, I always wanted to hit a topspin backhand, and I attended a famous tennis teacher’s clinic to learn how. He got me up in front of the class had me close my eyes and take a backhand grip, turned the racket in my hand to an unfamiliar position, and asked me how it felt. I replied, “Crummy!”, and he said, “Get used to that crummy feeling, because you’re going to hit a thousand balls with it this week.” By the end of the week, I had a real topspin backhand, and another level of understanding of the old AA saying, “Fake it ‘til you make it!”

A growing body of evidence shows that somewhere around a thousand repetitions is required to replace an old neural network with a new one, so this kind of change is not accomplished overnight, but it can be done. And in fact, that is another thing that cutting edge neuroscience is at least hinting at (since the resolution and speed are not developed enough yet to catch individual neural networks as they are firing): a thought, or feeling, or action is actually a transient neural network, a group of around ten thousand neurons, often widely distributed in the brain, that fire simultaneously, and if they repeat enough times, actually register in consciousness. Daniel Siegel in The Mindful Brain looks at the neuroscience of mindfulness practice, and shows fascinating data about how meditation actually changes the way the brain is wired, away from primitive reactivity, and toward a more conscious higher level of functioning. For example, before I started meditating over a decade ago, I would have

challenging moments during psychotherapy with difficult patients when I would become confused or reactive, and all too often would 'shoot from the hip' and say things I later regretted. After meditating a few years, I discovered that when I began to feel confused or emotionally flooded, if I centered my body in my chair and took a couple of mindful breaths, I would calm down and have a better chance of responding skillfully in a challenging moment, at least on my good days…

I think of meditating as a simple laboratory that eliminates as many outside distractions as possible from the task of observing what's going on in my mind and body. Siegel makes the scientific point that meditation (along with yoga and tai chi in the studies he quoted or conducted) is an 'integrative activity' in the brain, activating higher and lower centers as well as both sides of the brain simultaneously. The more we do this, the more robust our powers of self-observation and self-intervention become., Then we are able to recognize dysfunctional reactivity as it is arising and redirect our thoughts and actions to more productive pathways. Interesting studies cited by Daniel Goleman in Emotional Intelligence show that a ten week mindfulness course enabled the fear reaction to a subliminally perceived threat to be diverted from its usual terrified reaction in the right brain to the less reactive left brain, thereby avoiding its previously induced panic response, all within 250 milliseconds.

A big part of what meditation practice teaches me is that I can tolerate challenging physical and mental states without getting caught up in an escalating panic, and that once I return my focus to the breath, unpleasant inner states are revealed as transient and insubstantial. This important realization, which needs to be reinforced literally thousands of times before it becomes strong enough to hold up during extreme stress and challenge, is the behavioral cornerstone upon which end-of-life caregivers can build their coping strategies for the overwhelming existential challenges we often have to face in our work.

Buddhist psychology and neuroscience does offer some practical help in coping with the impossibly challenging work of abiding with dying and grieving people through their difficult transitions. Let's lay out the problem: the end-of-life situation is designed to evoke the deepest levels of reactivity and suffering for everyone involved, since it highlights many of our most cherished attachments. The dying person is losing everything precious to them: their health, their life, their freedom from pain, their most cherished activities and functions, their relationships, their world, and all too often, their dignity. Every incompletely grieved or worked through loss or trauma is likely to be re-stimulated at some point in the course of a terminal illness, and caregivers are there to support the dying and their loved ones and help them to

maintain as much equanimity and grace as possible through these challenges. The families and support communities of the dying will likewise be confronted with endless similar variations of the challenges faced by the dying person, and they too look to caregivers as their guides for making it through these harrowing times with as little unnecessary suffering and as much of a chance to offer support for their loved one as they can.

In my experience, a guide has to lead the way through unknown territory, and though we may have traveled the harrowing path from diagnosis of a life-threatening illness through death and grief and mourning many times with our patients, familiarity alone will not suffice to make us the best possible guides. For the sake of our own mental health, which will be reflected in our ability to continue to thrive while doing this work with heart, each of us needs to have come to terms with illness, infirmity, and death for ourselves. If we have not done this serious emotional spadework, no matter how good our technique is, it will be prone to fail us when our own unresolved issues around loss or trauma get re-stimulated by what our patients and their families are facing. For example, my own early history is one of significant abuse at the hands of those who were responsible for caring for me. I have put in an embarrassing amount of couch time in therapy trying to lay those demons to rest, but most of my biggest mistakes as a psychotherapist still arise around that issue. Several weeks ago, a skilled and trusted supervisee of mine was presenting a case in which she got off center in working with patient who was just summoning up the courage to talk about something really shameful to him. In her rush to deal with her own anxiety about what he might reveal, she made a move that probably made it more difficult for him to tell his secret. I felt a sudden protectiveness of him, and an intense need for her to see and acknowledge her error, and lost my own awareness that my old wounds had been triggered. As a result, I was not as gentle with her as she needed and deserved, so actually repeated the very same error she had made, just by losing awareness of myself at a critical moment. I actually became the unkind parent, and had a good deal of repairing to do (i.e., crow to eat) to make it right.

What this rather embarrassing example illustrates is that even when we have put a lot of time and energy into facing our own issues, if we lose mindfulness they can still turn around and bite us (and those who depend on us). So now that I've made my case for mindfulness practice as a necessary vehicle for ongoing awareness of areas of challenge for each of us, let's review a few specific issues that end-of-life caregivers would be well advised to work on and come to terms with.

The biggest emotional challenge faced as we confront death (or its early harbingers, the loss of cherished functions and relationships) is the inability to maintain our illusion of control. It is a big, dangerous universe out there, and the fantasy that we are in control of what does and doesn't happen to us and those we love is extremely reassuring when Mother Nature is kind enough to leave us alone in the reverie that we have the power to keep ourselves and our loved ones safe. Life-threatening illness rudely interrupts that illusion, including for us caregivers, and the ability to notice that this has happened, and to practice consciously letting go and not trying to push the river, can allow us to be islands of equanimity when things get chaotic around us. If we stay calm and non-reactive, it is much easier for patients and families to calm down themselves.

An equally formidable emotional challenge that death demands that we face is the universal fact of impermanence. The Buddha described impermanence as one of the basic characteristics of worldly existence, and science has done nothing to contradict him in two and a half millennia. Everything in the world always changes if you adjust the time or physical frame of reference, even the molecules in our bodies, let alone those bodies themselves. One of the reasons Americans have become so materialistic as a death-denying culture is that our beloved possessions can allow us to hide in an illusion of permanence, believing that these houses and furniture and gadgets are going to last forever (though we have a so-called new washing machine at home that seems smugly dedicated to helping us to remember otherwise by breaking down every few months…).

My own body in its middle age has taken to reminding me constantly about this very issue, as pain-free life fades into distant memory and various cherished functions become steadily shakier. On good days I regard these little indignities as my teachers about facing death with equanimity, and on not-so-good days I have my own little personal pity-parties, though my pride and concern for my reputation leads me to mostly keep that whining to myself. I do recommend bringing consciousness to our private encounters with mortality as the best training ground for developing the equanimity to lend to our patients and their families as they face more immediate and terrifying reminders of impermanence. My own bad example notwithstanding, routinely sharing these feelings about our own fragility with sympathetic friends or colleagues can help our growth in this area. An anthropologist observing a tribe in the highlands of Papua New Guinea overheard a very wise statement from an aboriginal sorcerer to his frustrated apprentice: "There are no obstructions, only instructions." Think

about this when you feel thwarted; a famous local teacher of psychotherapy named John Firman put the same piece of wisdom in different words: “What’s in the way **is** the way.”

A final more specific difficult area that end-of-life caregivers constantly encounter is the loss of cherished relationship, both between our patients and their families and in our own lives. The Buddha said that nirvana was more difficult, if not impossible, to be achieved by householders (as opposed to monastics) in part because the deep interdependence between family members made it impossible to maintain equanimity in the face of losing beloved persons. Now, a cynic might wonder if he was post hoc justifying running off and leaving the wife and kid to wander around with his fellow seekers of wisdom, but I actually think he had a good point. Interpersonal neurobiology shows that deep relationship creates big changes in the brains of both partners (see Louis Cozolino’s The Neurobiology of Human Relationships), such that losing each other has devastating effects. The more deeply we love, the more intertwined our minds and brains become in relationship, and the greater the suffering we sign on for when inevitably one of us leaves the other. The fact that humans still choose to love in spite of an intuitive awareness of this truth is one of our most admirable and courageous traits, to my mind.

The way I work with this is in myself is to routinely (at least once a day) think about the loss of each of the people I love most dearly, to allow myself to sink into the terror and misery of that possibility (or shouldn’t I say, inevitability) for a bit. This quick trip through my own ultimate nightmare serves (on good days, as my dear wife would no doubt remind me) to sharpen my appreciation for those I love, and to lessen my tendency to take them for granted. And my little daily exercise in trying on my most feared losses actually seems to make me more open-hearted and equanimous with patients and families that are facing such grim realities not by choice. What my daily practice reminds me, and enables me to feel more comfortable reminding them, is that we are endowed with the mechanisms to get through the suffering of such losses, and return more quickly to normal life if we allow ourselves to feel and express the misery we must endure when a loved one dies.

Astute listeners will have noted a similarity between the techniques I am suggesting to deal with all three of the existentially most challenging aspects of end-of-life care: loss of the illusion of control, impermanence, and loss of cherished relationships. Like many other Buddhist techniques, it involves doing the opposite of what our primitive reactions advise us to do. This principle dovetails back into my initial discussion about how the nature of our minds causes us to suffer, such that around difficult issues it is often more skillful in the long run to do

the opposite of your first instinct. All of our initial impulses around painful topics are to avoid them, sort of like the old joke about the patient coming to the doctor saying “Doc, it hurts when I do this,”, and the Doctor responding, “So don’t do that!” Many Buddhist teachers and authors discuss this tendency, and Pema Chodron (one of my favorites) calls it ‘leaning in’ to painful issues. I like that metaphor, since it seems more feasible to the less brave side of me than ‘diving in’ when something seems barely tolerable to think about, let alone embrace. The next time you encounter a place that scares you, instead of avoiding it, try mindfully leaning into the painful issue, especially in dialogue with someone wise and supportive, and you might be surprised at how much you learn and grow.

I would like to end by expressing my admiration and appreciation to all who choose this courageous but difficult pathway for their life’s work, and my wish and conviction that in the long run karma will see to it that the good they do for some of the most vulnerable members of our society will reflect back powerfully into their own lives.

Namaste.

Each breath by Carolyn Dille

is one
we’re here
and one
less

Reflections on Channel Surfing by Lynn Sunday

My husband Lee and I almost came to blows in our living room last week over his love affair with the channel selector. It was an old issue between us and we skirted dangerously close to ending up in couples counseling over it, but finally, some changes were made.

What happened was I joined Lee and our dog Hootie on the couch in front of our big, flat screen TV in anticipation of *Bill Maher's: Politically Incorrect*. We snuggled comfortably with Lee's arm around me, my head on his shoulder, and Hootie's little head resting on my curled-up legs. The show began and was laugh-out-loud funny. I was enjoying myself. At the first commercial break, Lee grabbed the remote and began channel surfing.

Question: is the channel selector just one more thing in this world for the male animal to explore and take charge of?

Anyway, the instant the commercial break came on, my generally considerate husband went through some kind of metamorphosis; his channel selector finger got itchy and away we go; surfing's the name of the game! *Click!* We're watching a scene from a love story that moved me to tears; then are treated to a selection of details from a police report on serial killing. Nice. *Click! Click!* A fleshy woman in pink is sautéing shrimp with garlic; four fifty-something's are back packing, gaily, through Eastern Europe; five expressionless people stare at their cards during a tense moment in an international Poker championship. *Click!* We're in the middle of a bloody fight in an exciting film preview that Lee saw two nights ago—at full volume.

By the time he returned to Bill Maher, the show was already in progress, the audience was convulsed with laughter over what funny line I would never know.

Now to me, TV commercial breaks are inherently evil and should never be dignified by being watched by anyone. That's what mute buttons are for, with time spent productively, in peaceful silence, fetching drinks and munchies, visiting the bathroom, or even, as I told Lee snidely that night, for actually talking to each other.

"Will you please stop jumping from channel to channel?" I demanded nastily, turning to face him. "You do that every time we watch TV. *It drives me nuts!*"

Looking back on it I could have made my needs known more diplomatically, but despite the series of cool talks by my yoga instructor, Gail, regarding the maintaining of equanimity within—regardless of circumstances without—those were, unfortunately, the words I used.

Consequently, a rather stupid argument ensued with each of us biting down on our respective positions, like Hootie bites down on a bone.

"Why does it bother you so much?" Lee asked, annoyed. "I was curious about what else was on. I was exploring. Can't you just tune it out?"

"Why should I tune it out? " I asked righteously, glaring at him. "Why can't we have silence during the breaks? What would be wrong with that?"

The argument continued. I, somewhat pompously, stressed the physical, emotional, and spiritual benefits of meditative silence. Lee rose to the occasion and defended, with vigor, his apparently inalienable right to the *extremely*, annoying activity of channel surfing—*which I have no doubt, comes with being born male.*

We watched TV again a few evenings later, Boston Public was on. With the air of a martyr about to be set on fire, Lee muted the commercials and without once touching the channel selector, sat silently through each break. He didn't even click on the sound for a preview of a new show we hadn't seen yet. He didn't say a word, but I could feel his pain.

I have to say the silence was enjoyable, but somehow I didn't feel good about how pushy I'd been about getting my way. "Look, that's a preview for a new Clint Eastwood film." I told Lee. I ruffled his graying hair fondly as I got up from the couch. "You haven't seen that one yet. Why don't you turn on the sound and check it out while I get us some desert?"

The moment I left the room I heard Clint's voice as the preview came on, then the familiar click of the channel selector, followed by the sound of sirens, a woman screaming, and finally, a dog barking. At the blue tiled counter in our kitchen I sliced German Chocolate cake and scooped strawberry ice cream on top. When I returned to the living room with dessert, Lee—a happy man—was surfing channels rapid fire, like it was something he was born to do. "Does this really bother you?" he asked a little plaintively." I can turn it off….."

Loving him, I shook my head no and remembering to breathe and remain calm, I sat down beside him and offered him cake. Images whizzed by me like some psychedelic dream sequence, but this time I put Gail's words of wisdom to practice and focused my attention on my breath. Surprise! I wasn't irritated. I wasn't annoyed.

Channel surfing, I decided, may not be the finest of Lee's masculine qualities, but does appear to be part of who he is, so my best move is to live and let live. *Click!* Someone on a reality show was chomping down on an insect the size of Rhode Island. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, in and out, in and out; then I opened them and smiled at Lee. For this

moment, at least—and the moment, I understand, is all there is—I have achieved some measure of acceptance, maybe even equanimity.

The Dusty Road by Susan Ezequelle

So many travelers on a dusty road,
Walking, searching, wondering,
What is Truth?
These are the Seekers.

Out of the dust
Towns spring up along the road.
Houses secure, doors locked.
These are the Believers.

Wanderers seek Truth in spaciousness,
The blue sky in Autumn.
Believers look for something closed.
The mole hole in the garden.

Truth asks for a soft touch,
Carry it lightly in an open palm.
Belief demands clutching.
Grasp it, get a firm grip.

Truth turns its face from nothing.
The wondering gaze of a young child.
Belief bears a rigid countenance,
Fixed stare, frozen as a statue.

Truth welcomes all travelers,
A gracious generous host.
Knock on Belief's door,
It may shut in your face.

Truth has an open heart,
There's nothing to hide.
Belief is furtive, careful where it steps.
A fragile shell can be broken.

Illuminated Manuscript by Walter J. Filling

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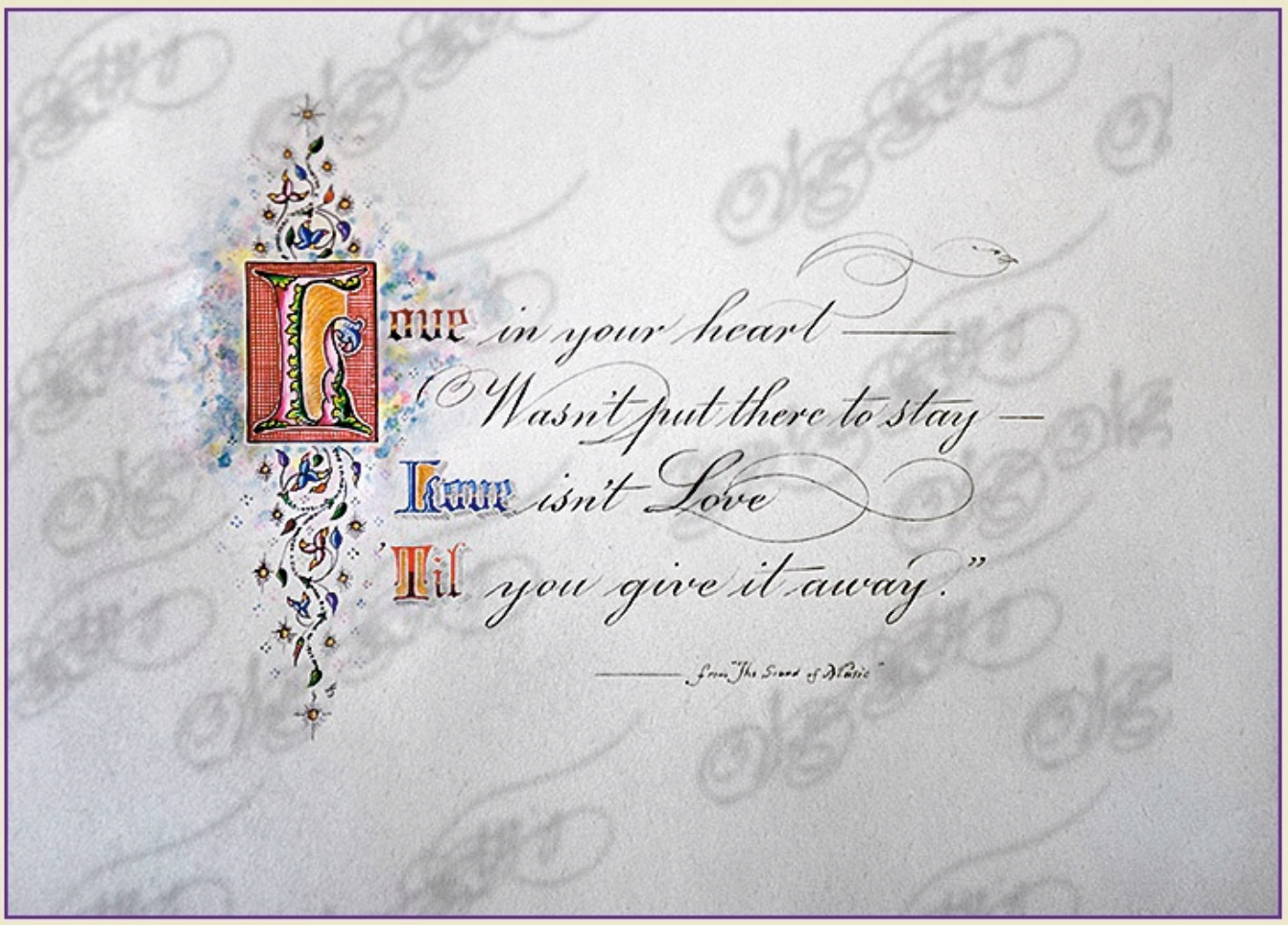

The End

Policies for *Passing It On* Submissions:

- Material will be peer reviewed and lightly edited
- Fiction or non-fiction should be 1,000 to 3,000 words
- Poetry, photographs and art will mostly remain within a page
- The over-all focus is on exploring mindfulness practice (not just Buddhist)
- References to mindfulness and contemplative practice are encouraged.

IMC's Mission

The Insight Meditation Center (IMC) is dedicated to the study and practice of Buddhist ideals - mindfulness, ethics, compassion, loving-kindness, and liberation. At the heart of all IMC activities is the practice of Insight Meditation, sometimes called mindfulness or Vipassana meditation. Based on a 2500-year-old Buddhist teaching, this practice helps us to see more deeply and clearly into our lives. With insight, we develop ways of living more peacefully, compassionately, and wisely.

Daily practice forms the foundation of Insight Meditation practice: daily meditation practice, and the practice of mindfulness and compassion as we go about our daily lives. Buddhist tradition also emphasizes the value of intensive meditation retreats. IMC's mission is to stay firmly rooted in the practices of meditation and retreats. From this foundation in meditation and mindfulness, we actively seek to find ways to support practitioners in integrating and applying the spiritual life in all areas of life.

IMC's Vision

Our vision for the Insight Meditation Center is to be a community-based meditation center where the practices and teachings of Insight Meditation are made available to those living urban lifestyles. IMC has six intertwining functions:

1. To provide a simple and quiet environment where the contemplative life can be developed and protected amidst the complexities of city living.
2. To offer teachings and practice opportunities that complement Insight Meditation in supporting a balanced spiritual life from a Buddhist perspective.
3. To be a place where people can come together to cultivate and express their practice in and through their family, social, and community lives.
4. To bring in a variety of visiting Buddhist teachers who offer a wide range of Buddhist practices and viewpoints to our IMC community and the interested public.
5. To establish an urban retreat center offering a variety of residential retreat programs.
6. To offer all activities, including residential retreats, free of charge.

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