

"Down the Mountain"

Reading & sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno  
February 7, 2016

From *Comfortable With Uncertainty* by Pema Chödrön

Spiritual awakening is frequently described as a journey to the top of a mountain. We leave our attachments and our worldliness behind and slowly make our way to the top. At the peak we have transcended all pain. The only problem with this metaphor is that we leave all others behind. Their suffering continues, unrelieved by our personal escape.

On the journey of the warrior-bodhisattva, the path goes down, not up, as if the mountain pointed toward the earth instead of the sky. Instead of transcending the suffering of all creatures, we move toward turbulence and doubt however we can. We explore the reality and unpredictability of insecurity and pain, and we try not to push it away. If it takes years, if it takes lifetimes, we let it be as it is. At our own pace, without speed or aggression, we move down and down and down. With us move millions of others, our companions in awakening from fear. At the bottom we discover water, the healing water of bodhichitta. Bodhichitta is our heart – our wounded, softened heart. Right down there in the thick of things, we discover the love that will not die. This love is bodichitta. It is gentle and warm; it is clear and sharp; it is open and spacious. The awakened heart of bodhichitta is the basic goodness of all beings.

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What better moment to be considering the journey inward than on a snow day? This sermon is the second one in a row written in the midst of a storm. Inward I go. Down down down ... to the place that is soft and warm; clear and sharp; open and spacious where, I hope, week after week, that there I will find something restorative to share with all of you.

Let's go down down down down down together: to the muck. To the richness of life however challenging.

The journey inward is often chided in our multifaceted culture. The phrase: "navel gazing" comes to mind. Let's start with our families. Perhaps you have loved ones who don't quite get what you're doing here every Sunday morning ... or at your yoga classes ... or with that

journal you carry with you wherever you go ... or at the silent retreat you signed up for ... or for your initial interest in and now your devotion to meditation.

I wonder how Mary felt when Jesus announced over Sunday dinner that he was going to go out to the desert for 40 days and 40 nights. Or what Henry David Thoreau's father said upon hearing the news that his son was building a cabin in the woods and fleeing Concord's trappings. More recently, I wonder if Julia Butterfly Hill's decision to live at the top of a redwood tree for two years was met with waves of affirmation from her family. I think of Matthew, the young man I told you about one Christmas Eve. Remember I met him in South Station after he'd just completed hiking the Appalachian Trail? He had had it with the world's suffering and so with no prior hiking experience, with no sense of what lay ahead he hit the trail because he was "mad at God". But really, he hit the trail because he needed to find his way home. But before he stepped foot on the trail, his mother was none too happy with her son's idea. I know because I asked him.

So "the journey inward" is frequently misunderstood. Unsupported. Sometimes it is with good reason: many embark on the inward journey and head up the top of the mountain thereby leaving all suffering behind. We may have some energetic instinct but not so much in the way of mindful discernment.

In her wisdom, which is grounded in Tibetan Buddhism, Pema Chodron points us downward instead. She encourages in the seeker a curiosity about all things that disturb us for in the things that disturb us there are lessons to be learned.

Who is Pema Chödrön?

Kate, my spouse, participated in meditation sessions and took classes at the Dharmadatu Center in NYC and then the Tibetan sangha in our neighborhood in Berkeley, CA. At the conclusion of one course of study she made the decision to take refuge vows in other words: to dedicate her life to the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Sangha, and the Dharma. (The Buddha: ultimate refuge. The Sangha: the community of Buddhists. The Dharma: the Path)

Prior to the ceremony each of the devotees had a brief appointment with Pema. The purpose of this meeting was to receive one's spiritual name – symbolizing a new identity from that point forward.

The ceremony itself was simple and deeply moving. Present in the room was a sense of humility and solemnity.

I tell you this story to share the effect that Pema had on the people present, me among them. Pema, for those of you who may not be familiar, is a nun, teacher, and writer, her books are engaging, accessible, poetic and yes, they are frequently funny. Tibetan Buddhism is not so easily understood. She translates for a Western audience while maintaining the integrity of the tradition.

Pema was to be the ordained nun to receive these requests to formally become part of the Buddhist community.

I didn't know what to expect. Would light emanate from her very being? Would she be like her books: deep and straight talking? Or would she be more aloof, shy, perhaps?

She was the former and more. The room didn't fill with light when she entered the room but she did seem to kindle everyone else's light. She spoke with a self-assurance that was warm and encouraging. The respected and renowned teacher did something that made us feel comfortable in her presence: to somewhat lighten up the solemnity of the moment she tossed a small handful of rice – used the ritual – at one of the Sangha's helpers. Everyone laughed - none more than her – and with a twinkle in her eye.

I watched her closely – as I'm sure everyone did. I wanted to witness the countenance of one as wise as she. And what did I see? A regular person. A mom. A teacher. Granted, a regular person who has dedicated her life to the inner journey, to spiritual awakening, but it is clear that to Pema the inner journey is nothing if not relational.

The way of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition is very clear:

We are meant to be in relationship with our fellow humans. We are not meant to leave the hard parts of our lives behind to journey *up* to the mountaintop. We are to journey down to the valley where, like ourselves, millions of others are trying to get home. There we will find others who like

ourselves, are struggling with mental illness. Loneliness. Grief. Addiction. There we will witness and experience suffering. For, life is suffering – so says Buddhism's first Noble Truth.

And we are not meant to flee from the suffering. This tradition is not about fight or flight. It is about engaging with the object of our suffering and that of others. Pema invites us to consider this wisdom:

*Maybe ... we don't like the way reality is now and therefore wish it would go away fast. But what we find ... is that nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know. If we run a hundred miles an hour to the other end of the continent in order to get away from the obstacle, we find the very same problem waiting for us when we arrive. It just keeps returning with new names, forms, manifestations until we learn whatever it has to teach us about where we are separating ourselves from reality, how we are pulling back instead of opening up, closing down instead of allowing ourselves to experience fully whatever we encounter, without hesitating or retreating into ourselves. (When Things Fall Apart by Pema Chödrön)*

Who of us has taken to the open road – literally or metaphorically - to separate ourselves from our reality only to find the same challenge greeting us when we've reached our destination?

We will not save ourselves by running from our selves. The first life we save must be our own.

From now until June, you're going to hear me talking a lot about our Coming of Age youth. Here's a story.

We're doing an exercise that's typically called "forced choice." The subject is Unitarian Universalist values: what they are & how to live in accordance with said values. A question is posed and a continuum set up in response. The youth are invited to place themselves where they land on the continuum in relation to the question.

Here's the question: Save yourself? Save the world? Save the world was on this side. Save yourself on that side. Which is the UU value?

As you can imagine, a very interesting debate ensues.

"You can't save others if you can't save yourself." Went one of the arguments.

"By saving others, you'll save yourself." Went another one of the arguments.

Here is my two cents borrowed from another industry:

"If you are travelling with a child or someone who requires assistance, secure your own mask first and then assist the other person."

The inward journey to spiritual awakening ... to the love that does not die ... to the open heart ... requires that we take care of ourselves but always in relationship to others.

Our life's call is to journey inward, down down down the mountain to spiritual awakening. Along the way we will encounter turbulence and trouble, insecurity and pain because that's how life is. That's the human condition. And the inward journey invites us to investigate the turbulence, trouble, insecurity and pain – not matter how long it takes us to find the lessons in all of it. It may take years. No matter. At least we are on the path.

And we do so in the company of millions of others. We do not ignore suffering thinking that by doing so, it does not exist or that it will go away. That's magical thinking.

The inward journey requires eyes open wide. It requires courage and patience, too. Because, as Pema says, we are awakening from fear. Fear puts us to sleep. Prevents us from seeing and feeling much of anything other than fear itself.

And we are living in a time of great fear and anxiety. The wise man said that for a child, fear is black and white and comes and goes. But as we grow older fear is gray and it is constant. (Kevin Kling "Fear" from *The Dog Says How*) And there are people in the world who are banking on our fear. Some of them are running for president.

The inward journey is not an easy path. But what choice do we have, Friends? To escape from fear or to steep in fear. Let's choose to move down the mountain, to the cool waters of open hearts. To the love that will not die.

That's how you keep fear at bay. By listening to the wisdom of the wise ones – wise ones like Pema and the beloved 3 year-old child in your life. By holding close the suffering of others and considering what there is to learn from their suffering as well as our own.

We will travel down down down until:

*At the bottom we discover water, the healing water of bodhichitta. Bodhichitta is our heart – our wounded, softened heart. Right down there in the thick of things, we discover the love that will not die. This love is bodichitta. It is gentle and warm; it is clear and sharp; it is open and spacious. The awakened heart of bodhichitta is the basic goodness of all beings.*

Our first principle encourages us to the awakened heart of bodichitta ... to the belief in the basic goodness of all beings, their inherent worth and dignity, if you will.

The journey is down and there we find the love that will not die: the love of our wounded softened hearts.

Amen. Blessed be.