

October 29, 2012

Practice of the Week: Try something new, for the benefit of others.

The great 20th century Thai meditation master Ajahn Chah said, "Speech that does not acknowledge uncertainty is not the speech of the sage." Life is so complex, changeable and unpredictable that it is very hard to state anything with confidence. "Seems like anything can happen at anytime," might be the speech of the sage. The Buddha pointed to the changeability of everything as one of the key facts of life and one that we'd better learn to dance with if we want to be happy.

In the face of all this flux and uncertainty, the only way to take action is to take risks and experiment. We make our best guess, try something, learn from the experience and adjust, if necessary. We can strengthen our experimental attitude with the motivation to learn lessons for the sake of others. When we do so, we become that much more willing to take a risk.

The bodhisattva ethic of Tibetan Buddhism holds that benefitting others deeply satisfies our longing for belonging. Yet our habitual patterns tend to be at odds with this yearning. We practice so many mental habits that disconnect us from others: We are blinded to others by attachment to our views, we judge people, we confuse loving others with getting what we want from them, and we are unwilling to sit with the discomfort that certain people provoke in us. The effect is that we cast so many people out of our hearts. While this buys us some comfort, it greatly limits our ability to satisfy our urge to connect. The bodhisattva ethic is so compassionate to ourselves that it stops at nothing short of loving all beings. This aspiration is challenging, hard work, and goes deeply against our conditioning. And yet it is what our heart demands of us.

There are many practices that foster our bodhisattva spirit. We can:

contemplate how it is actions that hurt us and not the actor behind the actions, so we can oppose harmful actions while connecting with the basic humanity of the actor; or contemplate that our judgments are not helpful because they are almost always projections of our inner values and assumptions onto others and are thus more about us than them. We can employ meditative practices that: make us more comfortable with the discomfort people might evoke in us by being mindful of such emotions; or actively kindle our altruistic emotions, such as lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity practices.

This week I suggest an action-oriented practice:

1. Try something new. When you are unsure what course of action to take, experiment by taking the choice that is most novel. No matter what, you will learn something. We can hold the fear compassionately, as we step into the risk, and can remember that fear is the "about to grow" emotion, as Jack Kornfield likes to say.

2. When taking the novel choice, consciously remind yourself that you are doing so for the benefit of others. The bodhisattva spirit will help you be braver, as the "about to grow" moment has added import.

With an attitude of experimentation for the sake of others, our pain and joy become that much more meaningful. We can go through experiences knowing that what we are learning may be useful to someone else someday. Today's hard-won lesson can be tomorrow's gift to another. Isn't this one great way to use the precious gift of life we have received?