

The Wise Heart in Response to the Newtown Tragedy

By Peter B. Williams

How can our hearts possibly stay open in the onslaught of such horrific news as 20 school children and their six adult caregivers being gunned down in Newtown, Conn.? There is only one way and that is for our hearts to break.

Given the devastation of the event, it is wise to approach the situation with care. I offer first some general thoughts for dealing with the tragedy followed by meditation practice suggestions that can help us stay open, caring, and compassionate in the face of this horror. My hope is that these suggestions will be useful in response to any tragic event.

1. Reach out for support – Who can hold this much pain alone? Share your thoughts and feelings with your friends and family. Remember how deeply we can connect with others around shared pain.

2. Practice compassion - Open with compassion towards as much of the tragedy as you are willing to open (see practice below). This is something we can do and can give us a sense of agency and it can cut helplessness. Send prayers of compassion to the families and friends of all involved. Pray for the victims in whatever way feels appropriate to you. (If it fits your belief system, Tibetan Buddhism would have you send compassion to the consciousnesses of the victims, which are very disoriented by being disembodied. Pray that they see and move towards light in this bardo state before being reborn.)

3. Focus on the good – Reaffirm all that feels good and real and true in your life. Something as tragic as this is so disorienting. To reorient yourself, practice the simple acts of love and care that make your heart feel good. Be generous, open and kind. Make a conscious effort to notice all the goodness in the world. Celebrate

happiness wherever and whenever you see it (see the practice below). It is easy to be cynical about humanity and the media bias towards the negative supports this. I've never seen a story with a headline such as this: "We Made it Through Another Day on a Million Little Acts of Kindness." How else does our planet make its annual pilgrimage around the sun? Human society would pop a million sprockets instantaneously if the aggregate of daily human interactions were not weighted towards kindness, respect, generosity and caring. All this goodness is still out there. Avoid the downward spiral of thinking the Newtown tragedy is the true nature of humanity. It isn't. The horror of such an event can block out the goodness if we do not make a conscious effort to counteract it.

Here is a link to remind you of simple human goodness. Make sure to scroll all the way to the bottom as I think that is the most moving story:

26 Moments That Restored Our Faith In Humanity This Year
<http://www.buzzfeed.com/mjs538/moments-that-restored-our-faith-in-humanity-this-y>

4. Stay in the moment – If you are experiencing strong emotions around the event, just take it one moment at a time. It is easy to get overwhelmed by stories around how horrible this must be for the families involved or in trying to figure out how this could have happened. Ultimately, there is no way to make sense of this incredibly senseless and cruel act. Obviously there is tremendous grief for those who have lost loved ones, especially children, but unless we are directly connected to the grieving, it is hard to truly know what this is like for them. The wisest response is to hold the grieving in compassion and manage your own emotions in a simple way with

mindfulness. You can let go of elaborate stories about the event and just notice what it is like to feel sad or heartbroken or angry or confused. These are all emotions that can be explored with the grounded curiosity of mindfulness. Remember to anchor your attention in the body sensations of the emotion, noticing the thoughts and images in the periphery. Difficult emotions are much more workable when we take them one moment at a time.

5. Titrate your intake of news – The news media are providing us with constant updates on every little twist and wrinkle of the tragedy. Really monitor your emotional sensitivity level to this much information. How much news is really helpful to you? How many of the details do you really think you need to feel informed? Maybe the most spiritual thing about a TV or radio or computer is its off switch. Consciously decide when enough is enough. Remember that our minds are very susceptible to conditioning. What we do with our mental energy really matters. Realize that the cumulative effect of all the news can sneak up on you and tank your day when you are least expecting it. Mindless intake of horrific news can be numbing, immobilizing, and lead to depression. This is especially true about news we cannot do anything about. And the Newtown case is clearly one of these.

I am grateful for the media's coverage of the astonishingly heroic acts of the teachers, the principal, and the school psychologist, who gave their lives to protect the children in their charge. It is very helpful to remember such acts of courage and caring in the face of such insanity. Tuning into such stories can be empowering.

5. Get educated and involved around gun violence – Whatever your thoughts are on gun control, this is clearly a time when we need to be very thoughtful about how to reduce gun violence. Make your views known to your representatives in state and national government. It can help to take even small actions such as this.

To write letters to your political representatives, click on these links:

The President -
<http://www.whitehouse.gov/>

Senator Bennett -
<http://www.bennet.senate.gov/>

Senator Udall -
<http://www.markudall.senate.gov/>

U. S. Representative Polis -
<https://polis.house.gov/>

6. Talking to kids about the event – see this helpful link:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/15/health/tips-for-talking-to-children-about-the-elementary-school-mass-shooting.html>

PRACTICES

Here is the daily life practice I suggest for this week. It involves the two most basic responses of the wise heart in interaction with the world: Compassion for pain and sympathetic joy for happiness. These responses come from the same place – empathy. When the heart is wise, clear, open, and kind, empathy is our natural relationship with others.

The Buddha taught that compassion and sympathetic joy are two of the four heavenly abodes that can be developed infinitely for ourselves and others. How wonderful that these heart states are not pre-set, but can be strengthened through repeated practice. For the formal compassion and sympathetic joy practices as taught in Theravada Buddhism, you can go to my website by clicking on this link:

http://truemewithin.net/psych2/Dharma_essays.html

and scrolling down to:

“How to Meditate 7: Compassion Essay and Meditation Instructions”

“How to Meditate 8: Sympathetic Joy Essay and Meditation Instructions”

Below is a description of how to do these practices more informally in our lives.

Compassion

Compassion is an absolutely necessary reality skill because pain is an absolutely unavoidable human experience. We tend to think that if we are suffering then something must be wrong. But the Buddha taught that pain is a natural part of life and we can actually be at ease in the midst of it through the sense of non-resistance and openness that derives from mindfulness. The heart quality of compassion is another way we can stay balanced and open in response to pain

The well-kept secret about compassion is that it can make us very happy. This is because opening our hearts to someone in pain connects us to them so deeply, and this connection is so satisfying. In addition, this connection keeps us buoyant and keeps us out of the overwhelm that so many of us fear in opening to suffering.

PRACTICE - The first part of this week’s practice is to open to compassion informally. As we move about our lives, whenever we notice someone in pain, see what it is like to silently send the phrase to them, “May you be free from suffering.” This wish expresses the essence of the feeling of compassion. Of course, we would want to do whatever we could to relieve a person of suffering. In addition, the key to feeling compassion is to connect with the simple pain and not go into big stories about what it is like for them or how you can analyze the situation to fix it. Such convoluted mental journeys can actually be a way of avoiding empathy and the pain someone is feeling. If we instead feel their difficulty in a simple way, we are more likely to feel the simple compassionate heart

response, of “Awww.” We can send compassion towards ourselves as well. When you notice your own pain, send yourself the compassion wish.

Sympathetic Joy

The world is not filled just with difficulty and hardship; joy and happiness are just as lawfully a part of life. In fact, humans have a strong bias towards the negative that has been wired into our brains through evolutionary, cultural, and psychological forces. Additionally, our experience is not a pre-given objective phenomenon, but rather an interaction of observer and observed. Reality is that to which we chose to pay attention. Therefore, we need to counteract the negativity bias that is wired into us and make an active attempt to focus on the positive. This is not Pollyanna naïveté but an important counterbalance for seeing reality more clearly.

So the first step of mudita is to actually notice the blessings and happiness in our lives and the lives of others. When we see this, just as compassion is the empathic response to pain, so, too, the empathic response to seeing happiness is sympathetic joy. Seeing happiness quite naturally gladdens our own heart. As the Dalai Lama says, “Why not make other people’s happiness your happiness. It will increase your chances by 6 billion to one!”

Secondly, we may block empathy towards someone’s well-being by crimping our heart with jealousy. We need to recognize that such envy is based on comparing and comparing is not necessary in relating to others. The key is to mindfully notice that comparing is happening, mentally note it “comparing,” and then let go of it. If we can simply tune into a person’s happiness without their situation in any way reflecting on our own, then we can empathize with their good fortune. And this naturally makes us happy.

PRACTICE - The second part of this week’s practice is to open to mudita informally. As

we move about our lives, whenever you notice someone being happy, see what it is like to silently send the phrase to them, "May you always be this happy." This wish expresses the essence of the feeling of sympathetic joy. Just as with compassion, keep it simple. The key to feeling mudita is to connect with the simple joy and not go into big stories about what it is like for the person. When you do this you are more likely to feel the simple joyful heart response, of "Yay!" You can send sympathetic joy towards yourself as well. When you notice your own happiness, send yourself the mudita wish.

Best of luck with practicing these twin responses of the wise, empathic heart.