

The Only Way I Know to Eliminate Suffering, by Darlene Cohen

Self-healing is an area I've explored intensely because I have had rheumatoid arthritis, a very painful and crippling disease, for eighteen years. It began in my seventh year of zen practice, while I was living at Green Gulch Farm. . . . Because of my pain I lived in a world of continual intrusive sensation. It was very much in my self-interest to notice what circumstances increased or decreased my pain and then alter my pain level by manipulating those circumstances. Before becoming so ill, I had trouble interrupting my discursive mind to make the observations necessary to begin a mindfulness practice. On a Sunday I would vow to notice all my postural changes, determined to say to myself when I went from sitting to standing to lying: "Now I'm standing." Now I'm lying." Then the next time I remembered, Thursday, say, I would suddenly cry, "Oh! I'm standing!" After becoming ill, I was highly motivated to make these observations. Changing my posture was a dramatic event in my life. I needed to heed every little sensation in my legs and feet in order to go from sitting to standing. Getting out of my bed and going to the bathroom took the same kind of focus and attention as going on safari.

I lived a half-block from the San Francisco Zen Center and used to try to go to dinner there once a week as a treat to myself. I would walk down the hill, which brought me to the bottom of a number of steps to the front door. Going up the steps would be the second leg of a laborious journey. Sometimes I would make it all the way to the steps and not be able to go up them. So I would have to strain all the way back up the hill to my apartment. I asked myself, what is it about my walking that is so tiring? What I called "walking" was the part of the step when my foot met the sidewalk. From the point of view of the joints, that is the most stressful component of walking. The joints get a rest when the foot is in the air, just before it strikes the pavement. I found that by focussing on the foot that was in the air instead of the foot that was striking the pavement, my stamina increased enormously. After making this observation, I never again failed to climb the steps to knock on the front door of Zen Center.

I was struck that the focus of my attention could make that much difference in my physical ability. I began to search out the times my brain was clumping together many disparate motions into an idea which would prevent me from overcoming an obstacle, and then I concentrated on breaking down these aggregates of ideas into discrete units of smaller experience that I could master. Sick or well, we all do this all the time. We get into the idea of something, the clump, the heap, the pile, rather than the actual experience. Someone says, "I can't practice because I haven't been to the zendo in three weeks" instead of just going to the zendo when she can. When I haul out the carrots and the cuttingboard during the arthritis workshops I give, everybody immediately groans: "I can't cut carrots with my arthritic hands!" But when you actually hold the knife in your hands, feeling its wooden handle and sharp, solid blade; and you touch the vulnerable flesh of the carrot on the cuttingboard; your wrist goes up and down, up and down; and the orange cylinders of carrot begin to pile up on the board, you realize: "I can cut carrots." Tears come to people's eyes.

. . . . When Trungpa Rimpoche wrote in [The Sacred Path of the Warrior](#) that "the human potential for intelligence and dignity is attuned to experiencing the objects around us, the brilliance of the bright blue sky, the freshness of green fields, and the beauty of the trees and mountains," I think he was suggesting that our intelligence and dignity themselves are developed by our being alive for the mundane chaos of our lives. If we cultivate awareness of our actual experience, without reference to any preconceived idea, then we don't prefer any particular state of mind. Intimacy with our activity and the objects around us connects us deeply to our lives. This connection --- to

the earth, our bodies, our sense impressions, our creative energies, our feelings, to other people - is the only way I know of to alleviate suffering. To me our awareness of these things without preference is a meditation that synchronizes body and mind. This synchronization, the experience of deep integrity, of being all of a piece, is a very deep healing. It is unconventional to value such a subtle experience. It is not encouraged in our culture. We're much more apt to strive to feel special, uniquely talented, particularly loved. It's extraordinary to be willing to live an ordinary life, to be fully alive for the laundry, to be present for the dishes. We overlook these everyday connections to our lives, waiting for The Event.

A client of mine was very annoyed and scolded her husband for coming in and telling me a joke while I was massaging her at her house. When I asked her why she minded so much, she said to me, "He was using up my time with you." She was not in a state of mind that could be satisfied by simply listening to the sound of her husband's voice as he told a joke, of feeling my fingers on her body, of sensing the animal presense of the three of us sharing the room. She didn't even examine the starved, jealous mind that resented his brief interruption.

Paradoxically, noticing this kind of small-mindedness can actually add rich texture to the weave of your life. When you include the shadow in your perceptions, your conscious life begins to be shaded and textured by your anguish and your petty little snits. Sanitizing your thoughts and your preoccupations not only squanders vital energy that would be better spent in your creative endeavors, but your not-so-presentable life can be enormously enriching and provide the compost for the development of compassion. If you have never given into temptation of any kind, how can you ever understand -- or embrace -- the sinner? I pointed out some of these things to my client. When I next saw her she told me that after our session she had begun to be flooded with perceptions. She had noticed how much pain her tense relationship with her teenaged son was causing her. Being numb had enabled her to tolerate their friction, but now it was clear to her that she couldn't live with those hard feelings. She had to engage him and discuss their problems.

People sometimes ask me where my own healing energy comes from. How in the midst of this pain, this implacable slow crippling, can I encourage myself and other people? My answer is that my healing comes from my bitterness itself, my despair, my terror. It comes from the shadow. I dip down into that muck again and again and then am flooded with its healing energy. Despite the renewal and vitality it gives me to face my deepest fears, I don't go willingly when they call. I've been around that wheel a million times: first I feel the despair, but I deny it for a few days; then its tugs become more insistent in proportion to my resistance; finally it overwhelms me and pulls me down, kicking and screaming all the way. It's clear I am caught, so at last I give up to this reunion with the dark aspect of my adjustment to pain and loss. Immediately the release begins: first peace and then the flood of vitality and healing energy. I can never just give up to it when I first feel it stir. You'd think after a million times with a happy ending, I could give up right away and just say, "Take me, I'm yours," but I never can. I always resist. I guess that's why it's called despair. If you went willingly, it would be called something else, like purification or renewal or something hopeful. It's staring defeat and annihilation in the face that's so terrifying; I must resist until it overwhelms me. But I've come to trust it deeply. It's enriched my life, informed my work, and taught me not to fear the dark.

It seems to me that when we fall ill, we have an opportunity we may not have noticed when we were well, to literally in-corp-orate the wisdom of the Buddhas, and to present it as our own body.

-- Excerpted from [Being Bodies](#) essay by Darlene Cohen