

Teah Strozer
Week One, *Life Hurts: Responding with RAIN*
April 6, 2015
“The Courage to Study the Self”
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Good morning, good afternoon. My name is Teah and this is a Tricycle online retreat. We're going to be doing this for the next four weeks. Just before we started filming, I was kind of thinking about why I was doing this in the first place and where I landed was there's so much suffering in the world especially lately if you're listening to the news. I feel like Buddhism has something now to offer to the world—a way of being in the world, a way of looking at one's own experience and the experience of others that can offer kind of a relief from the grasping, the greed, and the hatred, and aversion that we see around. That kind of greed and grasping and aversion starts with ourselves and if we can solve that inside and develop a kind of loving kindness toward ourselves that ripples out from ourselves to our family, to our friends, to where we work and maybe hopefully even farther so that if enough people are free of their own causes for their own suffering we can maybe have a world that is not so based on separation, a world that recognizes that we are all in this together; we have to solve this together.

So this is going to be my little offering to myself, to you, and to whomever is interested for our own freedom and then hopefully for the little bit of kindness spreading out into the world; the recognition of our own true nature will allow us to have I believe less difficulty among and between ourselves for the earth, for the animals, everything, so here we go.

So if you have read the little essay that I wrote, and that was published in *Tricycle*, it says that the spiritual path is not easy. Some people come to spirituality thinking that right away they'll sit down and they'll be in some kind of calm mind and eventually that is true, but the beginning for most people is not like that. Even if it's like that when you first sit down, if you really continue a spiritual practice, what will happen is the very things that you might have been avoiding in your life are going to be what the practice is going to be about. Spiritual practice goes right through and into suffering and the reason is because what our pain is—our pain is always around separation and it is that separation that we're going to study and it takes courage. It takes a kind, determined, a balanced effort, some humor is helpful, and courage. The word “courage” has in it the word “heart”—it has the word “closeness” and “heart” so courage means staying close with an open heart what it is that we have difficulty admitting sometimes to our self what is there.

So, the ability to do what we need to develop some skills—I want to talk about these skills over the next four weeks. Also what I said in that little essay: it seems to me the spiritual path is like two streams; it goes by two streams. One stream is a stream of insight and insight happens on its own; it's luck or it's sometimes grace—it's called grace. These insights do happen sometimes for

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people who just step on a bus or pick up an apple at the grocery store. They can happen for no reason at all and that's wonderful—when that happens, that's wonderful.

The other stream is a stream where we can do something. We can create the conditions that make it more likely that those kinds of insights occur and in that stream there are three skills I think that we can develop that are very, very helpful in allowing us to be with things that are really difficult in a skillful way so that they don't throw us and suck us back into the thoughts and emotions and ideas that make our life difficult.

So there's insight and then there is developing the skills we need in order to study what we call the self. Now the self thing is very interesting because there really is no inside, core, unchanging, and separate being in there; there's only the activity. We can say the self is a verb, there is only self-ing. And that's what we study because very, very deep inside each of us there's just like a wispy, gossamer sense of just—it's almost a whisper like “I am”—and this “I am” is the first sense of a separation on which we build through grasping and aversion a very, very solid sense of separation, a kind of a contracted sense of separation.

That contraction is painful so what we study when we are on a spiritual path is that self-ing mechanism, how it is created and re-created and maintained over and over again by believing ideas basically, ideas and emotional energies and sensations that we paste on this idea of me. Dogen, a really great Zen master of the 13th century, said, “To study the Buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be awakened by the 10,000 myriad things, and this is how the spiritual path works.” It's kind of interesting because you study yourself, you study the self, and that ultimately you find that what we've been trying so hard to create and maintain is the very thing that is causing our difficulties, our tension, difficulties in a relationship, a sense of struggle inside, an inability to rest, a kind of dis-ease at the bottom of it all that life itself is somehow not enough. How can that be?

Well, we feel that way and this is all based on this sense of separation. So there are three skills to develop that help us study the self because if we don't develop these skills we get sucked right in to the story of me so these skills are very, very helpful and they are three I think important ones. The first one is meditation. Yes. The second one is the ability to have continuity of you can say mindfulness or presence, the ability to be where you are and know what's happening as it's happening all day long so that's continuity of being present. And the third one is an acronym called RAIN. It means recognize—I'll get into it later—recognize, accept, investigate sensations in the body, and no identification.

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And with these three skills we can begin paddling that stream to create the conditions of insight to happen, and also really eliminate—I mean it’s true—you can eliminate this unnecessary suffering. The Buddha said, “I wouldn’t ask you to do this if I didn’t think that this can be done. I wouldn’t ask you to do this but it can be done and you can do this. And so I’m asking you, please practice.” I think he probably said, “Please do the eightfold path.”

So before we get to those three things, I’d like to make something clear: There’s a certain kind of attitude, intention, and sense of responsibility that it is good to be clear about before you start on the path, so that’s what I want to talk about next. It’s good to know that there’s a difference between suffering and pain—this is an interesting point. Pain comes with life. Pain is getting what you don’t want, not having what you do want: falling down and cutting your arm, losing a relationship, getting ill. These things just come with life, they’re unavoidable, and if we’re close to them—if we stay close to them and if we don’t resist them—they’re actually not so bad. They are cleansing; they can be maturing, places that we mature. They don’t have to be something that we are averse to; we can make friends with pain.

Grief is a kind of pain when someone dies or your dog or a person you love. When you lose somebody like that there’s a kind of a grieving that is not mental; no words are going on. The body just wells up in grief. It’s painful but it’s also very cleansing, very present, very human, comes with life, but there’s another kind that I’m going to call suffering just to make a distinction that has to do with how we respond to what goes on in life, how we respond to an arm being hurt or having a diagnosis of cancer—I’m sorry if that’s happening for people—or losing a relationship that you want. It’s how we respond to those things in life that happen that cause unnecessary pain and they are what we very much can address.

Now the interesting thing about knowing the difference between pain that just comes with life and this extra kind of unnecessary suffering is that the unnecessary suffering is a choice so when we begin a spiritual path it’s really good to be clear: Are you really ready to make the choice that you are done with this kind of suffering, this unnecessary extra kind of pushing and pulling, grasping and averting, denial and drama that is extra, that is a building of a self that we don’t need and that we can choose not to engage? It’s a choice; you have to want to make that choice. You have to want to give up all of the identities that come along with that unnecessary suffering, like I’m a victim or I’m better than you are or jealousy or any of a number of assumptions in relationships that we hold onto that cause our own suffering.

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And one of the reasons why it's hard to decide is because sometimes those identities—those suffering identities—are very familiar to us, a sense of depression or whatever it is, and if we give them up what are we going to replace them with? Well, it's scary because we replace them with nothing. The path is actually more and more and more surrendering and giving up as the path—the whole path—is about letting go and not replacing so it's kind of scary to let go of these old, familiar identities, these kind of fallback modes of reactivity, but it's very important to really know are you ready to let all of this stuff go.

If the answer is yes, all right; that's a good thing. So the next part of that being able to choose, and this is also kind of interesting, is you have to be willing to take full and complete responsibility for how you react to anything. So let's say somebody says something to you that you don't like; you get angry. One way of understanding that is to blame the other person and say, “You made me angry” so that's not taking responsibility. You can say or I guess a better way of putting it is you can acknowledge that getting angry is your chosen response to that situation. Let me give you maybe another example that might be better.

Let's say you're having a meeting and somebody comes in to the meeting and they jump on the table and start dancing and singing; they're very happy; they were just engaged or whatever and they're dancing on top of the table. This is an extreme example but so what? Well, let's say there are five people around that table. You very likely can have five different responses. One person can get on the table; maybe that person's their friend and they're very happy for whatever happened for them and they join the dance and so on and so forth. One person says, “This is ridiculous. That's the stupidest thing I've ever seen. Stop it immediately. There are rules happening. You can't just do that.” Another person might say, “Oh, that's a little bit on the edge of what's acceptable but okay, they can do it. I won't join in but I've got five minutes they can enjoy themselves and then leave.” Whatever it is, however you respond is your responsibility.

Let's say something really difficult happened for you. I don't want to so much bring up abuse and things like that, but let's say you've had that as a background and you're legitimately angry about that. It's not that it's okay for whatever happened to happen to you. It's just that your freedom does not lie by blaming the other person; your freedom lies in taking full responsibility to how you respond to that. So maybe later I can clarify that because that's a difficult thing to understand I think, but I think if you keep remembering where your own freedom lies that can be clarifying so in other words your freedom doesn't lie by pointing outside of yourself no matter what the situation. It doesn't mean you want the situation or the situation is right in any way but your freedom lies in taking full responsibility to how you respond to whatever happens. Okay.

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So the difference between pain and unnecessary suffering—that suffering is a choice and that in order to make that choice you have to take full responsibility for your behavior like an adult. Okay. So then there are two motivations. One is, and it is a really good one, once you decide that you don't want to suffer anymore it's like you completely decide that, I'm done; I am so done; I don't care what it is; just tell me what I need to do; I am not going to suffer anymore; this is over; I will do whatever it takes; I'm done. That was my motivation. I was done; I'd paid my dues, no more. That kind of motivation can take you a very long way, more and more subtle and subtle and subtle grasping identity. However separation and contraction happens, more and more and more subtle, no more suffering, I let it go, done, and matter of fact that's what the Buddha said, right? He studied the cause of suffering and the end of suffering, so to not want to suffer anymore—there you go.

And then the other motivation that works, and it is a very deep one, is to want to know what human life is about; what is really true; who am I really; what is this life about. We have this one shot and it's so small, so short, goes by so fast. What is life? Is there meaning? So some people, when they hear the word “enlightenment,” they want to know what that means and that's what for some people turns into what is really true, what is the truth, and that's a wonderful, wonderful motivation.

So two other things that are really helpful are to know what your intention is and the kind of attitude you bring toward practice, and the reason it's good to know what your intention is, is because the path is not easy so every so often when you slip away or you want to take a break or doubt comes up and you kind of think it's not working and it's the wrong teacher and the community you're doing it with is no good. When that kind of thing happens, it's really good to remember what your original intention was, so it's kind of good to be clear about it so one way to do that is to kind of settle down and just listen to what your heart wants.

I think for many, many people what we want is to be whole, to feel whole again. Somewhere in us very deep we already know we are this one life, there's totally no separation anywhere to be found, one wholeness that we all are, that we all live, and we yearn to return to that. So whatever your intention is, whether your heart's desire is to return to this life living itself out really or whether it's to not suffer or whether it's to know the truth, it's good to know what that motivation is, very good.

And then another thing to know is what kind of attitude to bring toward this journey. It's a journey—it's a lifetime journey. It is not a quick fix so some attitude, attitude of patience is good, underestimated, very good to have, patience, humor, a balanced effort, not too strict—a balanced effort. And you need to know yourself. If your tendency is strict, strict, strict, grasp,

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grasp, grasp, loosen up, if your tendency is I'll do it tomorrow, tighten up, right, so a balanced effort, effort without desire. Even though there's a sense of a goal, if your mind is at the goal, if you keep grasping onto the goal, it sets up this very dualistic seeker. I did this for a long time, six years; it's no good so be careful. If you're doing this grasping, making effort to get something, it's a dead end, and the reason it's a dead end is because the self that we're trying to expose and eventually dissolve is this seeking. It's not like there is this self that is seeking; seeking itself is the nature. That's what the self is: seeking itself is the self. You know what I mean? When you get angry there's not this "me" that's getting angry, self that's angry. Anger is. That is what self is or struggling and struggling. [Chögyam] Trungpa said this a lot, he said, "The struggle is the self. It's not there is this"—I keep saying this over and over again but do you understand what I'm saying?

Okay. So that's what you're looking at so don't engage the very things that the self uses to build itself up so attitude, so kindness, determination, courage, a balanced effort, patience. Did I say "courage?" It takes a lot of courage and what else? Curiosity is really important; you want to be curious, what's going on now; am I present enough to catch the trigger thought that rose anger in me; was I present enough for that; what is that connected to; how does that work. Be curious. All right. Oh, one other thing. Suzuki Roshi—who brought our lineage to the United States, in his book, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, a wonderful book—said "beginner's mind" in that book, and in fact the temple that he originally started in San Francisco is called Beginner's Mind Temple. And he says in his book, "Wisdom is readiness of mind; readiness of mind is wisdom, an open mind, a beginner's mind."

And there's another way of putting that. There's a wonderful story a very smart professor who wanted to practice, came to a Zen master and he was telling him all of his information, all of what he knew about Zen and what he knew about Buddhism and so on and so forth, and he's coming to practice. Right? So the Zen master was offering tea and he has a teacup in front of him and a teacup in front of the person who came and the Zen master is pouring tea and the cup is half full and then three-quarters full and it's beginning to overflow. And the student says, "What are you doing? The cup is overflowing. Stop. That's enough. Stop" and the Zen master says, "Well, it's just like coming to practice. If you already know everything, there's no room to learn anything." I think I got the basic gist of the story right anyway. So it's the same thing, an open mind, an attitude that has an open mind, curiosity, willingness to be with whatever is arising; it's very important, not knowing. There's another story, another Zen story. How did it go? Right. A student is about to go on a journey, a pilgrimage, and the teacher asks him, "Where are you going?" and he said, "I don't know" and the master said, "Not knowing is nearest" so that kind of openness of attitude is very important. Okay.

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So I wanted to read a poem.

Should I offer some homework? Do you want to do some homework? So for the next week just why don't you pay attention to your own suffering and just see—notice what that's about; that's one thing you can do. You can reflect and see if you have a sense of what your intention might be, why you would be doing this path, and if you want to you can pay attention to anything, pay attention to breath as often as you can or pay attention to posture. Just begin to notice that you can pay attention so either more intellectual homework or just a paying attention homework is good to do. Should I read a poem?

Sure.

This poem is by Anita Barrows and it's called “Questo Muro” and it starts with a little bit of Italian, which I'm not going to read because I can't, I don't want to muck it up, but the poem is a kind—to me it's a kind of a—what do you call it an image or a metaphor, maybe a metaphor for what I've been talking about, which is that going toward your own suffering is the path and it's represented by a wall of fire so here's a poem:

You will come at a turning of the trail
to a wall of flame.
After the hard climb & the exhausted dreaming
you will come to a place where he
with whom you have walked this far
will stop, will stand
beside you on the treacherous steep path
& stare as you shiver at the moving wall, the flame
that blocks your vision of what
comes after. And that one
who you thought would accompany you always,
who held your face
tenderly a little while in his hands—
who pressed the palm of his hands into drenched grass
& washed from your cheeks the soot, the tear-tracks—
he is telling you now
that all that stands between you
and everything you have known since the beginning
is this: this wall. Between yourself
& the beloved, between yourself & your joy,
the riverbank swaying with flowers, the shaft

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of sunlight on the rock, the song.
Will you pass through it now, will you let it consume
whatever solidness this is
you call your life, & send
you out, a tremor of heat,
a radiance, a changed flickering thing?

Did you like that poem? Isn't it wonderful? Yeah, that's the end of the first session and see you next week.