OPEN EYE
Meditation Group
See for Yourself

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Not Loosing Heart

On Not Losing Heart -Pema Chödrön
When we're tempted to give up, a simple shift in perspective can remind us that everything we do matters.

Many of us who are engaged with the world experience discouragement regularly. If you're concerned about the environment, social justice and equity, prison reform, the welfare of immigrants, or the welfare of people and the planet in general, it's very easy to lose heart. But even though there are many situations that seem unfixable, I feel it's important not to lose heart. The question then becomes: How? How do we not let ourselves spiral downward into a mindset of increasing hopelessness and negativity? Or, if we're already finding ourselves going downhill, how do we pull ourselves up?

One encouraging thing I hear over and over, from people working in all kinds of fields, is that they see a lot of basic goodness in people. My friend Jarvis Masters has been on death row in California since 1985. Many of his friends and neighbors have murdered people. But he said to me once, "I've never met anybody where I didn't see their basic goodness. When you really talk to these guys, there's so much regret and heartbreak and sad family history. You begin to see people's tenderness in terms of basic goodness."

The reason we often start to go downhill with losing heart is that we allow ourselves to get hooked by our emotions. When we get hooked—when we get really angry, resentful, fearful, or selfish—we start to go a little unconscious. We lose our payu— our awareness of what we're doing with our body, speech, and mind. In this state, it's all too easy to let ourselves spiral downward. The first step in pulling yourself up is to notice and acknowledge when you're going unconscious. Without doing that, nothing can get better for you. How could you change anything if you're not aware of what's going on?

When we are losing heart because of our own struggles in life, one of the best antidotes is to put things in a bigger context. Sometimes this just happens naturally. For example, I was working with a student who's a wonderful person, but he was completely stuck in certain areas of his life. He had a habit of turning inward on himself that resulted in his feeling like a victim. He was always saying, "Why me?" I tried to give him good advice for years, he went to therapy and did many brave things to work with his issues, but nothing worked. Despite his obvious basic goodness and strength, nothing was getting through to him.

Then he found out he had incurable cancer. Overnight, his habitual pattern was remedied. Soon after, I was in a car with him and someone was walking slowly through the crosswalk after the light had changed. He started to get angry, which was his habit in those situations, but then he abruptly stopped and said, "I don't have time to get pissed off at someone for walking across the street too slowly." He also had some very stuck relationships, particularly with his mother. They couldn't stop doing the same dance. But after his cancer diagnosis, he was on the phone with her and when she said something that would normally trigger him, he said, "Mom, I'm probably going to die soon, and I don't have time to do this to you anymore." It all changed overnight. His years of meditation and therapy had helped set the stage, but it was only when he put things in a bigger context that he could actually break free from his habits.

Finding out we don't have much time left can help enlarge our perspective, but not everyone suddenly gets a bad cancer report. We don't have to depend on a dramatic or life-threatening event to wake us up. Again, I think of my friend Jarvis, who sees things from a big perspective because he's spent so much time developing his compassion. Once he was in the prison yard and a guard started taunting him, trying to goad him into fighting back. But Jarvis didn't

take the bait. Then his friends said, “How can you take that from him? How can you be so calm? Is it your Buddhism that does that?”And he said,“No, it’s not my Buddhism. I’ve gotten letters from the kids of the guards, who tell me that when they have a hard day they come home and take it out on their family. I didn’t want this man to go home and beat his kids.” So compassion can enlarge our view as well. You think about the wider consequences of getting hooked and you don’t let yourself act in a way that brings pain to other people.

As someone once pointed out to me, when you become conscious, the first thing you discover is why you stayed unconscious all those years. Being conscious means you really have to feel what you feel, which is frequently very vulnerable and raw. My friend with cancer was willing to go to that vulnerable place because he didn’t want to waste time on pettiness, when everything seemed trivial in the face of what was coming. Jarvis let himself be vulnerable to someone who had power over him because he knew what the consequences might be for the guard’s family. By putting things in a bigger context, they were able to enter a whole realm of practice—learning to stay with the rawness or vulnerability of being human.

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Heart Touching Heart -Joseph Goldstein

On an intense Zen retreat, insight meditation teacher Joseph Goldstein opens up to the vulnerable experience of compassion.

The practice of compassion means letting experience in. A Japanese poet, a woman named Izumi Shikibu who lived in the tenth century, wrote:

“Watching the moon at dawn, solitary, mid-sky, I knew myself completely. No part left out.”

When we can open to all parts of ourselves and to others in the world, something quite extraordinary happens. We begin to connect with one another.

One of the most memorable experiences in my meditation practice occurred quite a few years ago. I was doing a Zen sesshin—an intensive meditation retreat—with Joshu Sasaki Roshi, a very fierce old Zen master. Roshi worked with the koan method. A koan can be a question the master gives you that does not have a rational answer. One of the most famous koans is “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” The idea is to penetrate the essential meaning, and then to demonstrate your understanding in your response to the teacher. In this sesshin, we all met with Roshi four times a day to give him the answer to our koan. Everything in the sesshin is very structured, building the tension and the charge in the mind. I would go in with my answers, but often Roshi would just say, “Oh, very stupid,” and then ring his bell to dismiss me. Once I gave my answer and he said, “Okay, but not Zen.” With each interview I was getting more and more uptight.

Finally, he had a little compassion for me and gave me an easier koan. He asked, “How do you manifest the Buddha while chanting a sutra?” A sutra is a Buddhist text, and we had been doing some chanting of sutras every day. Well, I thought I finally understood the koan: I would simply go in and chant a little of the sutra.

I don’t think Sasaki Roshi knew it at the time, but this koan touched some deep conditioning within me. It went back to my third grade singing teacher, whose advice to me was “Just mouth the words.” From then on, I had a strong inhibition about singing in public—yet here I was, having to perform in the pressure cooker of a sesshin.

Sesshin is held in silence except for interviews and chanting, and everything in the mind becomes hugely magnified. I was a total wreck. I rehearsed two lines of the sutra over and over, all the while getting more and more tense. When the bell rang for the interview, I went in, did my bows, started chanting—and completely messed up. I got all the words wrong, and the simple melody was nonexistent. I felt completely exposed, vulnerable, and raw.

In that moment, something quite special happened. Roshi looked at me, and with uncharacteristic tenderness said, “Oh . . . very good.” It was a moment of heart touching heart, still vivid after many years. In this powerful moment I saw that to receive compassion and love one must be willing to open to one’s vulnerability. Then we can connect heart to heart.