

Working with Trauma

by Rodney Smith

Once in a great while tragedy creates a challenge for which we are completely unprepared. September 11th comes to mind, but tragedy can also occur at the individual level as well. The unspeakable pain from such an event can be so acute that it spills over into everything we do. There is no container large enough to hold it. How does the Dharma prepare us to face these inevitable events? How do we make sense out of grave adversity so it feeds our practice rather than depletes our soul?

A student at a recent retreat in Massachusetts spoke about his experience being on the 78th floor of the World Trade Center on September 11th as the towers crumbled. As he recounted his experience, he showed no emotion. He spoke dryly and factually about seeing people jump out of windows falling to their death and friends dying as the building collapsed. When I pointed out the discrepancy between his traumatic story and his affect, he nodded and fell silent. He said he couldn't feel anything anymore. His heart was closed.

A woman during another retreat recounted the death of her eight-year-old son who had been killed while hanging from monkey bars on the school playground. A class bully jumped up and grabbed the child's dangling legs, pulling the child to the ground where he fractured his skull and died. In the following weeks the mother went to the classroom of the bully and spoke to the class about forgiveness and not holding the child accountable for what had occurred. She said she wanted the class to befriend the child and hold no grudges.

Here are two very different responses to trauma. It seems from these accounts that trauma can either lead to self-protection or awaken the heart. After September 11th we saw how the heart can open and the nation come together as a community, and how just as suddenly, it can close around a protectionist attitude and a patriotic fervor. When pain jolts us into protectionism, not only does the heart constrict but also prejudice is the outcome. Prejudice begins to form around the edges of our pain like ice in a cold stream. It holds people guilty by association, be it religion, ethnicity, or skin color.

Our reaction to pain is individually determined. Some move into the deeper recesses of their mind and shut out emotions, others blame and thrash out. As long we have a strategy to circumvent the pain of the event, we will do so. If we can blame it away then the pain is not mine to bear. It is your fault, and you are responsible. As long as blame is a viable tactic to alleviate any sense of self-responsibility, our mind will find its way to persecution.

The last thing we want to do with pain is hold it as our own. We are vulnerable when we feel the pain. We have no assurance, no guarantee that we will emotionally survive the crisis. We feel helpless and hopeless. The egoic sense of self finds helplessness intolerable. Helplessness reminds the ego of its essential powerlessness and by implications it's ultimate emptiness. To fight this knowledge it moves in the opposite direction towards empowerment. The ego moves with anger and prejudice to cut off and isolate the outside source of pain, or it may use its power to close down and seal itself off from emotions altogether, but either way the sense of I remains in control.

The dharmic approach to this fight or flight strategy is to stand upright and turn towards the pain. It is ours to bear, but in facing it we are no longer in control. Sometimes we have the capacity to hold these emotions, and sometimes we do not. It doesn't matter, either way the emotions are our responsibility alone to work with skillfully. We do not attempt to conceal our inability to hold the emotion by allowing a shift towards blame and persecution. We keep working with it, perhaps using a skillful means like Metta, returning to the pain and opening a little more, or walking with it in nature. We do not allow it to turn back into shame and make us the culprit. We remain fully conscious of any subtle attempt to defend against it or personally identify with it. We are conscious of the strategies we employ and though we may not be up to its full force, we are learning about ourselves all along the way.

May all beings use their lives for learning.