

TOWARD RECOVERING FROM LOSS

In the aftermath of this week's election, I've been hearing from Sangha and non-Sangha alike, near and far, who are reeling from what has happened. They speak of feeling "heartsick," "in shock," and of course "scared." Over the past forty-eight hours I have been contending with some similar feelings (last night I had two deeply affecting dreams of Hillary Clinton, one of desolation and the other of peace), and offer the following perspectives to those who are struggling to cope with the new political landscape. (My only words to Trump supporters and Republicans in our Sangha are: "Congratulations – your people pulled off a stunning upset, and now let's all work together to effect change for the greater good.")

Any loss is a kind of death. An election campaign as long and punishing as this one can leave people feeling as bereft as they would at the sudden (this outcome, too, was unexpected) death of a close family member or friend. Some people have even likened the results of this election to the death of a dream (a woman President). Or so it feels to them now.

How, then, do we cope with death? In cultures everywhere, survivors gather together to work through their loss, and those now mourning the election results can do the same. Don't isolate yourself. As Buddhists we can also turn to chanting; *Affirming Faith in Mind*, with its emphasis on non-separation, might prove especially healing.

As practitioners of the Dharma we are called upon to adapt to *what is*. As such, the worst thing we can do now is dwell in our thoughts and emotions. We acknowledge our disappointments, our fears, even our anger, but without clinging to any of it. To ruminate about what might have been or what is to come is pointless. Worse, it binds us to our pain. Thus, there is no more important time than now to *sit*. We sit not to flee the winds of change, but to be able to move along with them. Such is resilience, one of the sure rewards of meditation.

At all times and everywhere, our experience of the world is determined largely by how we use – or misuse – our attention. When our attention is fully on what is before us – what we need to do, here, now – where is there room for regrets, anger, or anxiety? Look around you, and ground yourself in the people and things that need you. If you still feel too raw to engage in political activism, you'll find no end of social causes that could use your help. Here are some other suggestions:

- Get back to ordinary tasks. Get those leaves raked (they're not going to rake themselves), de-clutter a room, clean the fridge or oven. Pick up street litter.
- Engage in exercise and other body work. Get some fresh air; take a walk through the autumn colors.
- If you're weary of the news, take a break from it (when you have indigestion, stop eating!). It's one thing to graze on news in order to be informed enough to vote intelligently, but then does it really help now to keep consuming it? Take Thoreau's advice and sit: "Read not the Times, read the Eternities." Especially avoid websites and talk-radio and TV shows that leave you feeling at odds with others – that stoke the flames of partisan, racial, ethnic, or religious tribalism.
- Read a book that speaks to our shared humanity (spiritual literature or a life-affirming novel). To be reminded of the long view, read history.
- Spend some time with children.

- Listen to some elevating music. Watch a comedy show – even good-natured political comedy!
- Consider doing some metta meditation; direct loving-kindness to Hillary, Trump, or anyone else toward whom you may be feeling sympathy or anger (don't forget to include yourself). Gaze at a Buddha figure to see how he would take all this.
- Don't catastrophize. What you imagine will happen over the next four years is just your imagination – images and thoughts. Who of us really knows what will happen?

Although thoughts are seldom our friends, some cognitive reflections can be employed in the short term to serve as a lifeline. Reflect on the fundamental truth of suffering – that to the degree that we are attached to things of the world such as politics, we are setting ourselves up for pain. The 14th-century Japanese Zen master Muso Kokushi said, “When the world does not go as you wish, this should be a help to detachment of feelings from the repetitious cycle of becoming and decay, gaining and losing.” People who feel crushed by the election results need to balance their political concerns with a look into what is beyond the rise and fall of regimes. This balancing starts with sitting.

Comparisons can broaden our perspective. Consider that the Dharma survived – and even flourished through – centuries of civil war in China and Japan. Don't lose the big picture.

Reflect on the fundamental truth of impermanence. This saha world is just a pageant of change, the unfolding of cause and effect. We ourselves – all of us – somehow share responsibility for this week's eruption, and our actions and words moving forward will be instrumental in the kind of change to come.

Finally, don't despair if you feel defeated and don't rejoice if you feel triumphant, but heed the words of Zen master Dogen, from the 12th century (one of those long stretches of war):

Those who would practice the Dharma must deeply, deeply feel the passing nature of things, and have faith in karma.

Oh, and did I mention sitting?

Bodhi Kjolhede

November 11, 2016