

The Shock of Vulnerability

Throughout my life I have been blessed with relatively good health and vitality. I have decent genes and come from good stock, for which I am exceedingly grateful. As a college student, my father was a record setting athlete in track and field, and has remained physically active into his 70's. As a young girl, my mother was an energetic ranch-hand working cattle right alongside my grandfather. She has always been hearty and healthy, from a long line of women who typically live into their 90's. As a result, I have lived most of my life with an uncritical assumption that I, too, would remain healthy and active without any extraordinary effort on my part, and that I would naturally look and feel more youthful than my chronological age. Of course, this set of assumptions is really a kind of self-centered entitlement, completely in accord with our society's preference for youthful bodies and infinite good health, a form of clinging that has set me up for a certain kind of painful fall as things have begun to crumble. As they say, "ageing is not for sissies."

When this kind of grandiosity or entitlement is confronted by undeniable experience, therapists call it a "narcissistic injury." It is a terrible shock to confront one's messy humanity and to realize that this very special self you have cultivated and protected for so long is not so special after all. It is embarrassing and painful to be ordinary and vulnerable. It can also be a big relief.

The first time I went to San Francisco Zen Center as a guest student I was thrilled and nervous at the opportunity to practice in such a well known and historical center. I had planned the trip for over a year, had carefully designed a way to take the time off from my therapy practice, had negotiated with my partner to be gone for a week, and had read everything I could about the Zen Center and it's history. I had made it a big deal. The second day I was there I was given a *soji* assignment (a temple cleaning job) following morning service. My job was to vacuum the residents' lounge. I found the vacuum cleaner and began doing the job in the way I thought an enthusiastic Zen student should. At one point as I reached over to pick up and move a rather large chair in order to clean the area it covered, I was thinking about how cool it was to finally be at Zen Center after so much fantasizing about the trip, and how much I was going to learn by being in this wonderful place with these wonderful teachers. As I lifted the chair, something unpleasant happened in my back. I felt something like an electrical shock in my lower back, immediately followed by muscle spasms. I was unable to straighten up without intense pain. I somehow managed to slowly become upright enough to drag myself, along with the vacuum cleaner, back to the closet. I was then able to sneak down to the men's dorm in the basement without attracting too much attention. to myself. I lay down on my bed and pondered my situation.

Here I was, just beginning my special week and I was flat on my back. I knew this wouldn't just go away and I was slightly panicked. I also knew I couldn't even pack my things and go home. I wasn't able to sit on a plane in this condition. I was trapped and embarrassed. My body had betrayed me and I couldn't escape this temporary disability nor could I leave and hide my

embarrassment. I had to face THIS! My roommate came by and I solicited his help in going to the store and getting ibuprophen for the inflammation. He also took a note to both the Ino and the Work Leader to tell them the situation and then I just lay there – miserable and in disbelief.

My journal and pen were right by the bed and I found a small piece of paper I had been using for a bookmark. I wrote the following three phrases on the paper:

SLOW DOWN
PAY ATTENTION
DON'T GIVE UP

After a while I rolled over onto the floor, got up on my hands and knees, and pulled myself to my feet using the desk as a crutch. I could walk if I remained very upright, but I couldn't bow. I even found I could move around slowly and I could sit carefully in a chair, a big embarrassment for this enthusiastic beginner who was trying to sit on a zafu in full lotus. However, I could only do these basic things if I followed the three suggestions I had written on the paper. If I took my time, with very mindful attention, and didn't get caught in my story or trapped by fear, I could keep going. Of course, I also had to rest and allow healing rather than trying to be the best beginning Zen student ever.

Throughout the rest of that week I had the opportunity to meet myself, and the challenges of this new practice, in ways that I had never anticipated. I couldn't depend on my body as I ordinarily. I couldn't move about in habitual or unconscious ways. I had to be very focused and present in my body or I had a painful reminder that I just become distracted. I had never had such exquisite and precise help with practice before. This was not the teacher I had expected to meet at the San Francisco Zen Center, and yet I was intimately connected with what all the teachers would have suggested: enter practice through your body; be present with "things as it is"; let go of your preferences; study the self-centered dream and drop the clinging to that self. This list of practice recommendations could go on and, in fact, continues to this day.

Ten months later I returned to Zen Center to participate in my first seven-day sesshin. I carried that small piece of paper with me and put it on the altar in the room where I stayed. Each day of that difficult and wonderful week I was reminded to slow down, pay attention, and to not give up. These phrases helped me make my way through the sesshin and became important guides that have stayed with me. I began to have a visceral understanding of Pema Chodron's phrase - "the wisdom of no escape." I found myself backed into a corner with nowhere to turn except to follow the schedule of practice, The events which offered me this painful and useful opportunity were literally physical blows to my self-centered image of myself. I was shocked at how vulnerable I could feel and I began to wake up to the truth that simply by being alive we are always vulnerable, no matter what grandiose stories we have about ourselves. Actually, each day is a gift and a blessing, best met with gratitude. Our temporary bodies are miracles, the source of the most amazing pleasures and often very difficult pains. This is where we live – in this body. This is where we practice – with this

body and mind. And this is what the young Guatama saw on his secret trips outside the palace; that everything wasn't always beautiful and pleasant; that sickness, old age, and death are real and inevitable for everyone; and that the shock of this human vulnerability has the power to awaken us from the self-centered dream and liberate us from suffering if we slow down, pay attention, and don't give up.