

Blue Sky/Warm Sun: Ending the War with Life

October 2007 newsletter

You may have heard me describe our human nature with the image of the vast blue sky and the warm sun. The vast blue sky implies a sense of open space that includes our infinite potential. The sun implies qualities of warmth, clarity and the capacity for seeing what is there. The clouds of everyday life pass in and out of existence. Imperturbable, the sky is never fundamentally affected by these temporary phenomena. Together the sky and the sun form a picture of our True Nature or True Self: warm, open and clear. Our challenge is to welcome the clouds without forgetting who we are.

By welcome I don't mean liking the situation, ignoring our pain or denying our disappointments- I mean 'bowing' to the reality of the moment 'as-it-is'. Let's say you have a headache or heartache. Skillfully opening to the reality of the moment includes not liking it, perhaps wishing life were different AND, in the end, placing greater weight on the reality than on your preference. This is the fundamental skill to living an awakening life.

Recently, I had two students come to me with radically different approaches to their life situation. Maria (names are changed) was experiencing severe pain in her back that was preventing her from doing most of the activities that she really enjoyed. In addition to stopping her beloved running/ biking program most disturbing was the fact that she could not pick up her child. Perhaps more painful than her back were the incessant thoughts like: "how long would it last?", "what if this never changed?", "what if I get fat?", "this is not fair, "I hate this". I suggested to Maria that she pause for a moment, turn her attention inward and feel her next breath, the sensations of support from her chair and then stand back from the pain observing the sensations from a bit of distance. She found this very relieving, as if discovering that there was more to her than just the pain. When I asked her to do the same thing with her thoughts, she found it much more challenging. Eventually, with guidance, she was able to say: "Oh, yes, there is the thought 'what if this never changes?' and there is my body's reaction to that thought. This capacity to see the "clouds", to accept them WITHOUT IDENTIFYING herself with the sensation or thought was very liberating.

While William also had debilitating back pain, his strategy for dealing with it was in many ways opposite to Maria's. He came into my office and talked about his back as if it was an object in the world completely separate from himself. He wanted 'it' to get better and for me to fix 'it'. When I asked him to describe where he felt the pain, his response was in very general terms like someone pointing into a black hole and saying 'in there some where'. When I asked about the quality of the sensation, he could only use words like "pain" and "bad". As I inquired into whether the sensation was on the surface or deep, hot or cold, sharp or dull, etc., he began for the first time to turn inward toward the actual experiencing of these sensations. Amazingly, he began to feel a sense of relief as he became intimate with the living reality rather than the general concept called 'pain'. This capacity to sense into the reality of the moment without disassociating himself from it was very liberating.

With Maria and William we can recognize the two great tendencies of the human mind: to identify the Self with the current condition and/or to lose contact with the living reality of the moment and get lost in thought. The first strategy leaves us with the feeling of dependence upon the quality of the external situation for our happiness. We can often feel victimized by others, by life, by G-d or simply by circumstances. The second leaves us feeling removed from life, somehow unable to sense closeness and intimacy; true meaning and depth are impossible. Both of these strategies create confusion, separate us from our true nature and hence result in suffering.

Now it would be erroneous and naïve to think that returning to connection with our Self is always enjoyable. As long as we have bodies, minds and intimate relationships pain will arise at

times. Our great existential power is that we are not required to have the 'pain of pain' which is a good definition of suffering. We really can end this war with life. The blue sky and the warm sun do not come and go, they are always here, even when the clouds of pain, disappointment, depression, etc. block our view. As soon as there is even a small gap in the clouds, the blue sky is right there! What good news this is, just as even the darkest clouds never leave a trace on the sky so too, our True Self is never hurt or damaged by our life struggles. When we can remember who we truly are AND be a good host for our current situation then we are well on the way to awakening into "The Embodied Life".